
IMT School for Advanced Studies, Lucca, Italy

**The Untitled Title in 20th Century Art: Revolutionary Aspects
and Implications**

PhD Cognitive and Cultural Systems

Track in Analysis and Management of Cultural Heritage

XXXIII Cycle

**By Chiara Ianeselli
2021**

Reviewers' Page

The dissertation of Chiara Ianeselli is approved.

PhD Programme Coordinator: Pietro Pietrini, IMT School of Advanced Studies

Advisor: Maria Luisa Catoni, IMT School of Advanced Studies

Co-Advisor: Paolo Campiglio, Università degli Studi di Pavia

The dissertation of Chiara Ianeselli has been reviewed by:

Francesco Tedeschi, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

Paola Valenti, Università degli Studi di Genova

IMT School for Advanced Studies, Lucca

2021

a francesco

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	v
Vita and publications	vi
Abstract	vii
Notes to the reader	ix
Introduction	1
1. Titles: origins and relationship with works of art	2
1.1. The formation of titles	3
1.2. Implications of a title	27
1.3. Ambiguities of the untitled title	43
1.4. Reaching the powers of the Untitled title	46
1.5. Complexity of relating to an untitled work of art	60
2. The Untitled title in Abstract Expressionism: variants and reception of the term 71	
2.1. Abstract Expressionism: complexities of the term	72
2.2. Clyfford Still (1904 - 1980)	80
2.3. Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970)	101
2.4. Ad Reinhardt (1913 - 1967)	132
2.5. Jackson Pollock (1912 - 1956)	143
2.6. Willem De Kooning (1904 - 1997)	164
3. Reductionist Practices: Strategies of the Untitled title in Minimalism	171
3.1. The Untitled title in Minimalism	173
3.1.1. Agnes Martin (1912 - 2004)	199
3.1.2. Donald Judd (1928 - 1994)	216
3.1.3. Robert Ryman (1930 - 2019)	232
3.1.4. Robert Morris (1931 - 2018)	239
3.1.5. Dan Flavin (1933 - 1996)	249
4. The Untitled title in the Arte povera	250
4.1. Complexities of the Untitled title in Arte povera	253
4.1.1. Jannis Kounellis (1936 - 2017)	279
4.1.2. Giovanni Anselmo (1947)	284
4.1.3. Giulio Paolini (1940)	289

4.2.	Conclusions.....	292
Appendix.....		294
4.3.	Titling issues in artists affiliated with Abstract Expressionism	294
4.4.	Cases studies of the Untitled title	304
Bibliography.....		314

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the librarians and all the staff of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC for their assistance in the research process and for providing access to the sources.

My gratitude also goes to the staff of the Museum of Modern Art's Archives and the Guggenheim Museum's Archives in New York, to the New York Public Library, Art & Architecture Collection and to the Library of Archaeology and History of Art, in Piazza Venezia, Rome, as well as to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. My most sincere thanks to the Donald Judd Foundation, in particular to Caitlin Murray, for the extraordinary exchange and the insightful directions suggested. Fundamental is also to express my sincere thanks to librarians of the Arthur and Janet C. Ross Library, at the American Academy in Rome for their incredible generosity.

I would like to pay my special regards to Professor Richard Schiff, Professor Yve-Alain Bois, Professor James Elkins, whose expertise deeply enriched the directions of the research.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. David Anfam for his generous and incredibly invaluable discussion on the subject, in particular in relation to the work of Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko. My thanks also to Professor Claire Bishop, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York, where I could have spent a research period, unfortunately impossible due to the pandemic.

I also want to convey my gratefulness to my supervisors Professor Maria Luisa Catoni and Professor Paolo Campiglio for their continuous support of this study, which focused on a rather neglected research arena. I would like to thank Professor Paola Valenti and Professor Francesco Tedeschi for the meticulous scrutiny of the dissertation.

My gratitude goes especially to Giovanni Anselmo, Giulio Paolini, Giuseppe Penone, whose inspiration goes well beyond the present research.

I also would like to thank William Anastasi and Robert Longo, for the dialogue on the topic, which unfortunately I could not include in this thesis. Special thanks to Gian Enzo Sperone.

Thanks to Carlo Benvenuto, whose works will always remain Untitled.

I would like to thank the IMT School Professors, with whom, over the three years of the PhD Programme I have had a fruitful dialogue, and also the administrative staff, in particular Federica Pierotti and Maria M. Irigoyen.

Vita and publications

September 13, 1989	Born in Tione di Trento, Italy
2017	Villa Lena Curatorial Coordinator, Pisa, Italy
2016	Master's degree in Conservation and Management of Cultural Heritage, University of Trento, Italy Marks: 110/110 cum laude
2015	de Appel Curatorial Programme, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
2011	Bachelor's degree in Cultural Heritage, University of Trento, Italy Marks: 110/110 cum laude

Publications

Carlo Benvenuto. L'originale, exhibition catalogue, Rovereto, 2020

Gare de Moi, exhibition catalogue, Anatomical Theatre of Modena, Galleria Mazzoli, 2018

Au. Oscar Santillan, Galleria Mazzoli, 2015

The Morning I Killed a Fly, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Mazzoli, 2015

Spell to Spelling Spelling to Spell, exhibition catalogue, de Appel arts centre, 2015

Abstract

The ubiquitous abundance of the title untitled, in private hands as well as in museum collections, requires a more complex analysis. Titles deeply shape the reception of works of art, being considered a fundamental mediation point between the artist and the spectator. They have a major impact on the visual experience: the decision of not giving a title has significant ramifications, which must be further investigated. The goal of the present research is to comprehend what consequences the untitled title conveyed, and to define, through specific case studies and resulting interpreting categories, how and why it has been used, until becoming an unquestioned "term/definition" today.

The untitled title, a topic that has received little attention, demands a thorough examination because it is linked to significant cultural transformations in society and an increasing concentration on spectatorship.

Despite being extraordinary common, the lack of a title, or the untitled title, has not so far been documented and addressed: museum inventories even do not distinguish between the untitled title, as the actual lack of the title, and the Untitled title, as the result of an authorial choice. The core questions of the research focus on how and why so many works of art are titled untitled and on all the implications the use of this term has. The project has been developed thanks to primary sources such as titles on works of art and declarations of artists, which refer explicitly or not directly to the use of the Untitled; secondary sources such as reflections of art historians, curators, critics, scholars and gallery owners. A direct dialogue with scholars, who have conducted research on artists that have purposefully chosen the Untitled title also belongs to the latter category.

The research has led to a clear definition of various classifications of use of the untitled as a title, allowing for key distinctions. Secondly, it has allowed to trace the art historical roots of the Untitled title, in particular by looking at declarations and writings of artists on the specific topic of titling. Furthermore, this research has enabled for the identification and better contextualization of the term Untitled, analysing in particular exhibitions and catalogs. It has been possible to demonstrate how the reasons behind the use of the title Untitled as a title can significantly differ, as for example in the case of artists affiliated with Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and Arte povera. The project has also illustrated how the untitled title is a complicated issue in today's exhibition of works, particularly in relation to label definition. The Untitled title's revolutionary potency has waned in recent decades, and it has now become a popular term.

Notes to the reader

In the thesis there are distinctions in the writing of the term untitled, with a small or a capital initial or in italic. The different cases serve to differentiate the various situations presented in the following chapters. Please find here a clarification:

- The term “untitled” indicates the general lack of a title of a work of art, and in particular it refers to those cases in which the presence of an untitled title cannot be associated with an authorial decision.
- The term “Untitled” indicates the being untitled of a work of art, as consequence of an authorial decision.
- The term *Untitled* serves as a title and it is used in the present thesis to precisely indicate a work of art which is titled Untitled.

When it has not been possible to clearly determine to which category the work belonged to the choice of the term untitled seemed more adapt. Due to the significant presence of a various dates, codes, numbers, often used as a title, quotations are referenced in the footnotes, while they are presented in the text without any specifications, such as page or year of publication.

Introduction

The title Untitled has become more and more frequent and it is a feature of works now widely present in museums and art galleries, as well as in private hands.

It is fundamental to consider all the various scenarios and hypothesis that led a work of art to lack the title or to be purposefully titled Untitled, in fact, the reasons might differ significantly.

The current research focuses on the postwar period, with the years immediately following WWII serving as the study's starting point and the current years serving as the study's second limit. The lack of titles in works of art from before the XIX century, and their consequent titling after their subject, is another field of inquiry where various variables and histories play a role: this will not be the subject of discussion of the present research, as the chronology would expand infinitely.

The focus will be mostly on Europe and the United States of America in terms of context, given the intensive discourse that occurred after the war and the commonality of formats explored.

1. Titles: origins and relationship with works of art

In this chapter, after a first, brief analysis on the history of the development of the title and its consequences, a wide overview will be given to the spectrum of the untitled title in modern and contemporary art. It is, indeed, fundamental to understand the impact titles have on spectatorship in order to document how crucial and powerful the Untitled title is, with all the implications it brings along. Although the analysis of the relationship word-image involves many different disciplines, as phenomenology, philosophy, and aesthetics, the main area of research will be art historical sources. The title is a modern invention introduced in the XVIII century and used more consistently in the XIX century, widely experimented with in the last century. As it will be presented, it is anyhow fundamental to always question the authorship of titles: many actors are, in fact, involved in the process of the display of works of art, from the moment they leave the artist's studio, until the show in a gallery or in a museum. Moreover, attention will be posed on the significance of the title: should it, if authorial, be considered a preferable way through which to look at works of art? This research opens up discussions on the identity of the work of art, its classification, definition, and it involves the ontological and philosophical properties related to its semantic value. After this overview, the focus will be posed on the untitled title, a particularly complex term used to express a wide range of possibilities, mainly the untitled as a lack of a title, the untitled as to indicate a not finished artwork and the Untitled title, consequence of an authorial choice – in this case the Untitled will be written with capital "u", as a proposal of distinction from the other cases. The desire of leaving a work without title could be reached only in particular cultural and art historical circumstances, strictly dependent upon the emancipation of the artist, and, paradoxically, the rise of attention of the public, among others. The use of the term Untitled, as an authorial choice, is at the core of the first chapter.

1.1. The formation of titles

The most detailed accounts on the history of the development of titles were written by John Welchman (*Invisible Colors: A Visual History of Titles*, Yale Press) in 1997, and by Ruth Bernard Yeazell (*Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names*, Princeton Press), in 2015. Yeazell carefully analyses and traces the development and introduction of titles and labels in the museological and museographic discourse, and also considers various case studies of the definitions of titles by different actors, as for example by artists, art dealers, collectors. It is significant that, prior to her publication, only a few other studies addressed the issue. As a matter of fact, the “concern about titles is a relatively recent phenomenon”¹. It is even more surprising in comparison with the attention given to titles in other contexts: “considering the importance that this problem holds for literature, one is surprised that it has attracted so little attention [...] Yet the territory is so vast, its history so unexplored and uncharted”². In general, the relationship image – word is particularly problematic and its balance has often been violated on one side or the other, up to the point that the “the image had to be silent and the speech blinded itself”³. As W.J.T. Mitchell has observed, in an age focused on “all-pervasive image making, we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is

¹ Steven G. Kellman, “Dropping Names: The Poetics of Titles”, in *Criticism*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Spring 1975, Wayne State University Press, p. 156.

² Harry Levin, “The Title as a Literary Genre”, in *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 72, No. 4, Oct., 1977, Modern Humanities Research Association, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

³ Gottfried Boehm, “Bildbeschreibung. Über di Grenzen von Bild und Sprache”, 1995, reprinted in Gottfried Boehm, *La svolta iconica*, edited by Maria Giuseppina Di Monte and Michele di Monte, Meltemi 2009, p. 188.

to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them”⁴. The complexity of this relation will be the framework of analysis of untitled works of art.

Art production until the XVI century has been mostly based on the transmission of a commission from the patron, who could be also an ecclesiast or a nobleman, to the artist, sometimes through the written form. These documents, when still preserved, are extremely precious, as they describe what the artist was asked to represent. It is possible to note that the subjects mentioned have mostly been derived from untraceable tradition, religious sources or conventions and very rarely artists could carve out a space for expressing their freedom in terms of the definition of the scene: every figure was precisely defined, also in terms of costs, as for example in relation to the materials needed. These descriptions were not contextually produced with the public experience of the artworks, and were not conceived to be read from anyone else, nor to remain necessarily as texts to posterity.

Inventories are the most precious source for what concerns descriptions and accounts of works of art, as a matter of fact, most of the titles originated from there. The earliest inventories of collections contain extremely basic information regarding the items⁵: usually authorship (if present), quantity, and a very brief description, sometimes including also the measurements. The short description focuses mainly on what the item is (its constituent media, as for example oil on wood) and what it represents, in simple and clear words⁶. These inventories have proven to

⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, University of Chicago, 1995, p. 90.

⁵ For a more detailed reconstruction of the inventories of artworks consider the chapter “Early Cataloguers” and “Academies” in Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names*, quot., Kindle Edition.

⁶ For example as in the inventory in 1589 of the Medici Tribuna that lists: “Un quadro simile in tavola ritrattovi una Nostra Donna con figliolo in collo Santa Anna e San Giovanni et San Giuseppe, con cornice di noce, alta braccia 2 0/2 e largo braccia 2 0/8,

be fundamental to art historians in many ways, as for example for assessing the location, movements of artworks and also in identifying authors: in general inventories are tools particularly useful for reconstructing collections. Nevertheless, their often too generic wording, not univocal, such as *Virgin with the Child*, or *Holy Scene*, *Landscape* or *Still Life*, does not provide enough information to unequivocally identify or fully decode a piece of art. It is fundamental to note that it is not possible to consider the descriptions as “titles” of the works, as they were not conceived by the authors and were not integrant parts of the works themselves: they were used in a time when titles simply did not exist. These words, present in early inventories, were written mostly on the occasion of the movements (also in terms of property) of collections or when a list of items was needed. They were not meant to provide the viewer with an interpretation or reading of the work of art, rather they were simply used to clearly identify the work, and be their record: often they also are the unique sources useful for the reconstruction of the life of certain works of art⁷. These descriptions could be described as pure administrative tools, definitely not titles (the use of this term is, indeed, anachronistic at this stage). A title, which, on the contrary, is assumed to be, like a personal name, a

distinctive designative individual name for a work, a designator

di mano di Raffaello da Urbino, n. 1” in my translation: “A similar picture on the table portrays a Our Lady with a son in her neck Santa Anna and San Giovanni et San Giuseppe, with a walnut frame, 2 0/2 arms high and 2 0/8 arms wide, by the hand of Raffaello da Urbino, n. 1”, from <http://www.memofonte.it/home/files/pdf/inv.236.pdf>, accessed on January 13, 2020.

⁷ Of course some chronicles have been derived after visits to specific contexts, as for example Giorgio Vasari’s descriptions compiled in his numerous travels, in *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (1550). He mostly referred to the works through their subjects.

which seeks to distinguish this work from all others. This I shall call the strict designative sense of entitling.⁸

Titles definitely are a modern invention:

For the vast majority of European paintings before the eighteenth century, the absence of a title testified not to a deliberate refusal of prevailing custom but to the default condition of artistic practice. That these are not the works we presently designate as Untitled has more to do with reception, broadly understood, than it does with production. Such pictures have their names, but we do not owe those names to their makers.⁹

The life reconstruction of every work of art would, potentially, also concern the actual title, how it was assigned and if it has changed in time, as well as who have been the authors of these modifications. An artwork could, in fact, have many titles, also due to the stratification of the various names given to it.

These words, that only later have been transformed into titles, came into existence mainly due to the marketing and movements of these works and their subsequent acquisition by collectors, later on by museums, or other institutions: this led to the necessity of more complex systems of recognition, with also the addition of identification codes and inventory numbers.

Although these descriptions appear to be rather clear in their aim to identify, according to Yeazell, they are particularly problematic: “The requirement to label pictures - even for the simple purpose of assuring

⁸ John Fisher, “Entitling”, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Dec., 1984, University of Chicago, p. 289.

⁹ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names*, quot., chapter 1, Kindle Edition.

that one canvas in a crowded competition can be distinguished from the next - is always bumping up against the viewer's appetite for significance"¹⁰, especially in the modern perception. The reading of a work of art is definitively time and culturally specific, as well as highly subjective – a consideration that many artists will express much later on, when they favoured the use of the term Untitled as a title. This complexity can also shed some light on why, in many cases, works contain text on their same surface, whether inscriptions or pre-modern forms of labels. Works were circulating and often their subject could not be easily identified, especially in contexts far from the production origin. Even in front of an apparently not ambiguous work:

we must ask whether we were within our rights when we identified the subject known to the interpretant with that which the artist had to face. Can we always tell, without drawing upon supplementary evidence, what logical phase of a subject a painter had in mind at the moment when he set out to work? The answer is clearly in the negative.¹¹

The impossibility of easily and univocally defining the content of a work is related to the not unprejudiced nature of seeing, which can be summarized in the sentence: “the innocent eye is blind and the virgin mind empty”¹². Even the vision of people not particularly familiar with works of art cannot be considered fully inexperienced or naïve, as they have anyways been subjected to the visual dimension and the related

¹⁰ *Ivi*, chapter 7, Kindle Edition.

¹¹ Richard Bernheimer, *The Nature of Representation a Phenomenological Inquiry*, New York University, 1961, p. 183.

¹² Nelson Goodman, *The Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, The Bobbs Merrill Company, 1968, p. 8.

phenomena, according to which there might be a content, a message, or a subject to decode.

The catch here, as Ernest Gombrich insists, is that there is no innocent eye. The eye comes always ancient to its work, obsessed by its own past and by old and new insinuations of the ear, nose, tongue, fingers, heart, and brain. It functions not as an instrument self-powered and alone, but as a dutiful member of a complex and capricious organism. Not only how but what it sees is regulated by need and prejudice! It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyses, constructs. It does not so much mirror as take and make; and what it takes and makes it sees not bare, as items without attributes, but as things, as food, as people, as enemies, as stars, as weapons. Nothing is seen nakedly or naked.¹³

Although the authorship of “titles” in collections dating before the XVIII century should be questioned, it happens that usually all “titles” are considered definitive and barely subjected to a revision process. These “titles” are often the result of facile processes of inventories, speeded up due to the common mass acquisition of works of art and the urgent need to list them and make them “accessible”. Sometimes these “titles” derive from centuries long naming tradition, whose origin cannot be precisely identified. Labels rarely offer space for the existence of multiple interpretations: by definition, labels tend to be assertive, as they have for long been considered the unique tool of information for the visitor: direct, quick, explanatory sources. The process that transformed the label, and the title included, from being a collector of information, to being a mediation tool should be further investigated, especially from a philological point of view.

¹³ *Ivi*, pp. 7-8.

Several artists, as for example Giorgione, often responded to private commissions and the identification of the subjects of his paintings is still pending, although multiple interpretations found their way. However, titles of his works, as in the case of *La Tempesta*¹⁴ (1502-3), on display at the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, do not bear traces of these issues on the label. Sometimes artists suggested the identification of a subject through exceptionally smart devices, such as Lorenzo Lotto's *Lucina Brembati* (1518), in which the name of the subject is encrypted in a rebus form in the upper left moon¹⁵, or in the case of the signature of Dosso Dossi, *San Girolamo* (1518), where the author's name (Dosso) is encrypted through the addition of a D to the "osso" (in English "bone"). These two works can well exemplify how the interpretations of these codes can be highly specific, in this case language specific. Bernard Yeazell is able to precisely identify the emergence of the titling practice:

The story begins with the decline of patronage and the rise of the art market in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but a principal turn comes with the public displays organized by the newly formed academies in France and England, where for the first time living artists were being invited to show their work to heterogeneous crowds who could not always be expected to recognize what they

¹⁴ Consider for example the numerous readings of *La Tempesta* by Giorgione (1502-1503), whose title seems to derive from a 1530 text by Marcantonio Michiel describing the work in Gabriele Vendramin's inventory: "paesetto in tela con la *tempesta* con la cingana e il soldato, fu de man de Zorzi de Castelfranco", "a village on canvas with the storm with the gypsy and the soldier, realized by de Zorzi de Castelfranco", my translation. Already a few years after the realization, it was no longer known what the painting portrayed and who the characters were.

¹⁵ Moon translated as "Luna" in Italian: Lotto added "ci" so to suggest the name Lucina. Later on, through art historical research, it was found out that the work is a portrait of Lucina Brembati.

were seeing. The actual development of the practice proved uneven; and it is only at the close of the XVIII century that the convention seems to have been articulated with any explicitness. In the meantime, the establishment of public art museums, the growth of print journalism, and the beginnings of art history as a discipline meant that many more people were getting into the business of interpreting pictures by naming them.¹⁶

As a large part of the production of artworks, at least until the XVI century, was connected with religious and devotional purposes, it is possible to note that the subjects were mostly transparent, evident, in certain contexts, thanks to their recognizable attributes, elements referred to during rituals: part of the process of what became known as the *biblia pauperum*. However, numerous are the examples where inscriptions are present, allowing for identification. These texts range from various cartouches of the saints, descriptions of allegories, as for example the allegories in Giotto's Cappella degli Scrovegni (1306); to the "Allegoria del Buon Governo" by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1338-1339), in Siena, Palazzo Pubblico, Sala della Pace. In most of the cases, however, the functioning of the images is based on a well-defined iconography, in which "the iconic is left at the mercy of an invisible text"¹⁷, an iconography that was, and remained, time and culturally specific. It is possible to record also more complicated inscriptions, such as *Vertumnus and Pomona* in the Medici country villa at Poggio a Caiano by Jacopo Pontormo (1519-21), which is recalling Virgilio's *Georgiche*. Inscriptions can also include words different from "content", as for example

¹⁶ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Pictures Titles*, quot., chapter 7, Kindle Edition.

¹⁷ Gottfried Boehm, "Jenseits der Sprache? Anmerkungen zur Logik der Bilder", edited by Burda, Maar, in Boehm, *La svolta iconica*, quot., p. 113, my translation.

dedications or signatures, as in Tiziano's inscription¹⁸ on the portrait of the Bishop Ludovico Beccadelli (1552) or on Vasari's portrait¹⁹ of Lorenzo il Magnifico (1533-34). It is possible to wonder if these inscriptions were always deciphered and understood (illiteracy was extremely common), consider for example Jacopo Zucchi's *The gods of Olympus with Hercules and the Muses*²⁰ (1570-77) or the case of Lorenzo Monaco's inscription²¹ on the *Incoronation of the Virgin*, 1414, which informs the public about the commission, the location and the author of the work. Although these words are important for the perception of the works, they cannot be considered titles. At these times works of art were mostly commissioned and the "context pre-determined their purpose and guided their reception"²²: they also mostly remained in private palaces or in churches. Frescos or paintings included names of the saints as a way to help devotees in the process of decoding the images, "as persons otherwise excluded from connoisseurship acquire at least some knowledge of what they are viewing"²³. In other cases, the possibility of

¹⁸ That reads: "IULIUS. PP. III / Venerabili fratri Ludovico Ep~o Ravellen~. Apud Dominium Venetorum nostro et Apli~catedis Nuntio. /Cum annum ageret LII, Titianus Vecellius faciebat. Venetijs MDLII Mense Julij".

¹⁹ That reads: "sicut maiores mihi ita et ego posteris mea virtute praeluxi"; "vitia virtuti subiacent"; "virtutum omnium vas"; "premium virtutis".

²⁰ Which reads "cuiq suum" abbreviation for *cuique suum*, "to each his own" or "may all get their due".

²¹ "(Hec Tabula Facta Est Pro Anima Zenobii Cecchi Franche Et Suo(Rum) In Recompesatione(M) Uni(Us) Alteri(Us) Tabule Per Eum In Hoc [Templo Posita Est Per Operam La]Urentii Joh(Anni)S Et Suo(Rum) Monaci Hui(Us) Ordinis Qui Eam Depi(N)Xit An(N)O D(Omi)Ni Mccccxiii Me(N)Se Febr(Uarii) T(Em)Pore Do(Mi)Ni Math(E)I Prioris H(Uius) Monaster(Ii)".

²² Thorn-R. Kray, "Nothing Left to See. Arnold Gehlen on Why Contemporary Art Needs Commentary", in *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2015, p. 239.

²³ Ruth Bernard Yeazel, *Picture Titles*, quot, chapter 1, Kindle edition.

recognition could be transferred to external agencies, such as for example the biblical stories narrated through the masses.

The progressive growth of private commissions excluded any needs for description of the subjects: the works remained in private properties and the close circuit that was granted the access to them was most likely familiar with what they portrayed.

For what concerns cases of apparently asserted “titles” of works dating before the XVII century, it is possible to state that these are accepted as titles *de facto*, but they were not conceived by their authors: usually not much research is carried out regarding these names and how they came into being. Very rarely it is possible to find information, on the label, about the origin of the title, but these crystalized descriptions, such as the mentioned Giorgione’s so-called *Tempesta*, cannot be considered “titles”. According to John Hollander “in general, pictures are not given titles by their painters until the nineteenth century; either the pictures are famous, and some label or subject-matter designation follows them about, or they are frequently untitled (and often, as a consequence, misread)”²⁴.

Although most of these words that accompany works of art dating before the XVIII century cannot be considered titles, they act as such, and, indeed, they play a fundamental role also in the present interaction with the works. On a museographical discourse, and specifically on the labels of private and public collections and displays, there is never a distinction between these “titles” and modern, authorial, titles: rarely clarifications about these words’ origin are present. As the practice of affixing a title does not require, unless in the presence of special occasions, such as the filling out of a form (as for example in exhibitions, certificates of

²⁴ John Hollander, “Haddock’s Eyes’: A Note on Theory of Titles,” in *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form*, Oxford University, 1975, p. 221.

authenticity, or insurances forms), an official and recorded document, it seems rather evident how difficult it is to assess with full certainty, and prove the authorial origin, of a determined title. As discussed in the introduction, the practice of affixing a title is quite a recent phenomenon and even more contemporary is the introduction of the Certificate of Authenticity. This practice of identifying unequivocally a work of art, stating its authenticity, was introduced in Italy in 1971²⁵ and then integrated in the Codice dei Beni Culturali e del Paesaggio. The Certificate contains schematic and essential information about the work of art. Certificates of authenticity have often been issued by gallery owners, family members and scholars, not strictly requiring the presence of the artists, considering also the frequent case of documents issued when the authors are dead. After these first paragraphs it is therefore possible to conclude that titles are often attributed by different actors.

It would be extremely important to let spectators be aware of the various implications the origin of a title brings along: the public is often misled to read the work through the lenses that labels provide, independently from the origins and the authors' identity. In the presence of what is known today as "title", it would be fundamental to firstly precisely note who is the author, and then to trace back the formation of these terms, with the structuring of a philological research that considers inventories and all the movements each artwork has been subjected to. As Yeazell has noted, the issue of titles in museums is particularly

²⁵ Art. No. 2 of the Pieraccini Law (L.n.1062/1971) stated the obligation of the seller to provide the buyer with a certificate of Authenticity, that consists of a photographic reproduction of the work of art with the basic information of the artwork, such as title, author, dimension medium and provenance confirmed by the seller. The norm is now present in the article 64, Legislative Decree 22 Jan. 2004, No. 42, Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio.

problematic, as the curators and the scholars²⁶ “must continually negotiate between the latest scholarship and fidelity to a tradition, however misguided, that has itself become part of a picture’s history”²⁷. In fact, often it happened that multiple titles were given to the same artwork or that the title was modified due to the changing of owner, or context.²⁸ It is fundamental to consider that an artwork is continually being reconfigured and “is constantly undergoing continuous and discontinuous transience as it ages, is altered by editors and conservators, and is resituated or re-territorialized in different publications and exhibition spaces”.²⁹ Moreover “the temporal and spatial peregrinations that works of art and literature undergo rarely pay homage to their creators’ intentions”³⁰, titles are no exceptions. As it will be presented in the following paragraphs, titles represent a highly significant element in analysing a work of art.

Titles have not developed at the same time in the various locations: several factors contributed to their progressive definition and each of them would require a major in-depth study. Titles responded to the basic need of identification of the works, whether inside the academy, in the inventory of private collections or simply as brief descriptions, captions, in a book. These needs mirrored the changes

²⁶ The process of definition of the labels and the title in particular should involve many scholars, especially in the many cases in which titles have not been conceived by the respective, authors.

²⁷ The author quotes the case of the Rembrandt’s “The Militia of District II under the Command of Frans Banninck Cocq”, known as the ‘Night Watch’, in Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., chapter 1.

²⁸ For different examples of the multiplicity of titles consider the chapter “Curators, Critics, Friends – and more dealers” in Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., chapter 1.

²⁹ Joseph Grigely, *Textuality: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism*, University of Michigan, 1995, chapter 4, no page number.

³⁰ Ivi, introduction.

societies were facing, from an economic, cultural, political and geographical point of view. The most relevant transformations will be listed in the following paragraphs.

The mobilization of artworks has contributed to the creation of more definite descriptions: words that could attempt to identify uniquely the works and help them to be decoded, as they crossed different cultures and spaces, as well as time. These descriptions, through the passing of time, have become, often without being questioned, the titles of the works. Titles came into existence also due to the circulation of prints, the creation and opening of art academies, artists' competitions and the progressive involvement of a larger audience, through the launch of public exhibitions³¹. The opening of auction houses, as for example Sotheby's in 1744 and Christie's in 1766, of course has had a significant impact on the acceleration of the titling practices and the creation of inventories of collections: artworks needed to be precisely identified for a multiplicity of purposes. The rise of art criticism, in its early forms, also impacted on the formation of titles. Moreover, although *ekphrasis* existed before titles, "titling permits discourse about artworks"³²: a title is the most perfect and synthetic, clear way to refer to a work of art. Titles, as it will be demonstrated in the following paragraphs, are, when defined by the author, also a way to control the artwork, as an attempt to officially, permanently (although some titles will be subjected to changes), define what it represents or not³³. Artists can, this way, extend their control over the work, beyond the studio and their area of immediate influence. All these mentioned phenomena led the works to

³¹ John Welchman highlighted in particular how the rise of the exhibitions impacted on the formation of titles.

³² John Fisher, "Entitling", quot., p. 289.

³³ Veronese's renowned *The Feast in the House of Levi* (1573) is perhaps a very clear example in this sense.

acquire names, names that became titles with the opening of museums and other public institutions: progressively, titles became more and more common in connection with the growing dimension of artistic literature. Titles also have become the vehicles of mythological stories, complex biblical events, heroic tales of the achievements of leaders. As soon as artists became interested in not explicit, evident subjects, titles also changed to the point of becoming essential constituents of artworks, as otherwise their messages would be fully incomprehensible. Artists in the XVIII and XIX centuries progressively have become interested in non-canonical subjects, prompting a liberation from the imperatives and dictates typical of asserted traditions, leading to major chances:

the search for purification and purity, for example, meant that starting from the last thirty years of the nineteenth century painting strived to conquer a purely visual image, freed from the weight of language, in an attempt to sever the links with the worlds of meaning of linguistic humanism handed down (with myth, religion or history) and re-melt them in a figurative fabric capable of opening ways of access to purely pictorial realities. Various testimonies document the development of a linguistic skepticism that understands the image as something unspeakable.³⁴

Nevertheless, the need to name these works was present, also due to the growing attention of public. The possibility of immediately learning more about the work of art through the label is a recent innovation, a commonly diffused standard that the museums have accustomed visitors to, but it is not something that came with the birth of museums: access to printed catalogues and written description of the works has not

³⁴ Gottfried Boehm, “Bildbeschreibung. Über di Grenzen von Bild und Sprache”, quot., p. 188.

occurred ubiquitously and at the same time. The formation of labels, in fact, is something yet to be fully researched. The necessary information about the works of art was in general displayed in paper form³⁵, in documents (not yet catalogues) separated from the *oeuvres*. The prevailing installation, the frame-to-frame arrangement, the *quadreria*, left usually no space to other information. The presence of stemmas, or other kind of attributes, was not always sufficient, and characters could not always be identified. The desire of a title was sometimes expressed directly by the viewers:

I have many times been surprised that painters, who have such a great interest in making us recognize the figures they want to use in order to move us, and who must encounter so many difficulties in making them recognized with the aid of the brush alone, do not always accompany their historical pictures with a short inscription. Most spectators, who are otherwise very capable of doing justice to the work, are not learned enough to guess the subject of a picture. For them it is sometimes like a beautiful woman who pleases but who speaks a language they do not understand at all. People soon grow tired of looking at her, because the duration of such pleasures, in which the mind has no part, is very short.³⁶

³⁵ “The Berlin Royal Gallery, which opened in 1830 under the direction of G. F. Waagen, appears to have been an exception. Testifying in 1835 before a parliamentary committee concerned with the founding of the National Gallery in London, Waagen reported that his institution offered not only a catalogue raisonné and a short catalogue for visitors but a ‘little paper’ on the wall with the name of the artist and “subject of each picture, and the date, arranged under the head of the school”, quoted after Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., chapter 1.

³⁶ Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur l'opéisme et sur la peinture*, Paris, Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux arts, 1993, p. 36, quoted after Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., chapter 1.

Jean-Baptiste Dubos expressed curiosity regarding for example the identity of the subject portrayed in paintings he was attempting to decode. It is possible to document the growing demand for knowledge also in more recent times, as for example in the 1960s, when spectators often lamented the lack of guidance, consider for example the approach of the public to Minimalist works, something that will be explored through various reviews in the third chapter. Already at the end of the XVIII century, there was a wish for some guidance in museums:

When a man enters a vast portico ornamented with paintings, he admires their beauty, elegance, and skill; if a book that explains their subjects to him is put into his hand, his attention awakens. Nothing escapes him; he enters into all the ideas of the painter. He becomes the judge of his intention and of his execution. In a word, he penetrates into his most secret thoughts.³⁷

The desire of labels has slowly emerged:

It is again for the utility of the public, to facilitate its instruction, that we propose to write the subject and the name of the painter at the bottom of each picture. One can't imagine how many false ideas the people bring back from a stroll in the Museum, for want of being able to guess the subject of the painted scenes they had before their eyes.³⁸

³⁷ Henri-Gabriel Duchesne, Pierre-Joseph Macquer, *Manuel du naturalist, Ouvrage dédié à M. de Buffon*, Paris, G. Desprez, 1771, viii., quoted after Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., chapter 9.

³⁸ “Beaux-arts: Sur le Muséum des arts de Paris: La décade philosophique, littéraire et politique; par une société de Républicains”, 4, no. 28 (1795), pp. 213-215; quoted after Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., chapter 9.

The modifications of the frame to frame hanging was performed by “aesthetic pioneers like James McNeill Whistler and the owners of the Grosvenor Gallery in London [...] in the 1870s”³⁹ but it was only in the first decades of the XX century that the hanging was drastically modified “though some exhibits, including the 1929 opening at MoMA itself, continued to reserve titles and other verbal information for the catalogue”⁴⁰; in fact, “the provision of wall labels did not become standard practice in European museums until the twentieth century”⁴¹. The practice of the wall label became common in the 1930s of the XX century, therefore requiring an official title to be designated. The definition of the content of these titles also changed:

Until the late nineteenth century in Western culture the names of paintings almost always directed attention to or were descriptions of the subject matter, the objects and events represented. Whistler began the break from this tradition. Although his paintings depict objects and events, he used titles such as ‘arrangements’, ‘symphonies’, and ‘nocturnes’, as if his works were as abstract as music.⁴²

But the titles of the works of James Abbott McNeill Whistler were often criticized, as he personally recorded. The progressive distancing of the title from the identifiable “subject” of the work constitutes an extremely rich element to analyse:

Whistler himself vacillated. Although his portrait of his mother was sent to the academy of 1872 as Arrangement in Grey and Black, it was

³⁹ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., chapter 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., chapter 9.

⁴² F. David Martin, “Naming Paintings”, in *Art Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Spring, 1966, p. 252.

catalogued Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother, apparently without protest from the artist. In *The Red Rag* he argued:

To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait? It must stand or fall on its merits as an 'arrangement.'..." In *The Gentle Art* he continued: "I know that many good people think my nomenclature funny and myself 'eccentric.' ...The vast majority of English folk cannot and will not consider a picture as a picture, apart from any story which it may be supposed to tell...As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour." Yet he once confessed to a friend with reference to the portrait of his mother, one does like to make one's Mummy just as nice as possible.⁴³

Whistler's association of words to his works is a clear example of the difference between the visual seeing and the recognition seeing, being the first exempt and immune from any interpretative dimension. According to Konrad Fiedler, in the visual seeing, it is possible to record the "attempt to purge the seeing of any interference of knowing, feeling or remembering"⁴⁴, as if to reach the innocent eye, highly criticized by many authors, as quoted in the initial paragraphs of this chapter.

Literature and rhetoric played a fundamental role in the visual arts of the XVIII century: titles acquired significant value for their narrative powers, up to the point of being described as the "incubus of literature in painting"⁴⁵. The anecdotal dimension and storytelling

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Gottfried Boehm, "Bildbeschreibung. Über die Grenzen von Bild und Sprache", quot., p. 194.

⁴⁵ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön", 1940 reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, edited by John O'Brian, *University of Chicago*, 1986, p. 25.

became progressively more sophisticated, through the inclusion of more phantastic and phantasmagorical elements or all kind of details in the titles, as for example in the paintings of William Turner. Some of his titles, for example, read *The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last berth to be broken up*, 1838; *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the ‘Ariel’ left Harwich*. Also, some of the works of Gustave Courbet are accompanied by rich titles, as for example *The Painter’s Studio: A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in my Artistic and Moral Life*, 1855. This kind of titles helped the spectator in expanding the work dimension which, through words, gained progressively an unprecedented significance⁴⁶. Titles particularly evocative were also central in Romanticism.

The relationship between the works and words has become more and more complicated in time due to several factors, in particular in connection to major artistic changes occurred at the beginning of the XX century, masterfully identified by Clement Greenberg’s analysis *Towards a New Laocoön*. Although his reflections are mostly reflecting on acknowledged art historical events, he also focused on the relationship words - ideas and the literature that informed the creation and actual experience of the works. The proliferation of references, often declaimed in the titles, highly complicated the sceneries of numerous paintings: “realistic illusion in the service of sentimental and declamatory literature” according to Greenberg, contributed to the “speeding up of the process of degeneration”⁴⁷. A process that, according to him, was threatening works of art, reducing painting (“the chief victim”⁴⁸) as mere

⁴⁶ A research focusing specifically on this typology of titles and their reception would be extremely precious, unfortunately the studies on the topic are extremely limited.

⁴⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoön”, quot., p. 25.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

illustration of a written experience: “everything depends on the anecdote or the message”⁴⁹. At the turn of the century, according to Greenberg, a revolt occurred through the progressive liberation from the implications of Romanticism, the worlds of ideas and in general the dependence word-image, lead to a more and more consistent “greater emphasis upon form”⁵⁰, works slowly stopped being considered “as vessels of communication”⁵¹. The first author that challenged the “wordly” works, full of reference, is identified by Greenberg in Gustave Courbet that painted “only what they eye could see as a machine unaided by the mind”⁵², although, as mentioned, some of his titles still bear traces of a highly imaginative and referential world. Soon after, in Greenberg’s analysis, geometric shapes were introduced as subjects by other artists, with the apex reached by Cubism: artists were looking at seeing itself, with an emphasis on the optical properties, exploring and subsequently depicting and rendering those possibilities. Of course, this imaginary line is not as straight as it has been described, and it is possible to document various eccentric developments and involutions, as for example in Surrealism and Dadaism, which, according to Greenberg, “turned back to the confusion of literature”⁵³. This analysis can be useful as it reflects, of course partially and with exceptions, the kind of titles artists were using, as for example the extremely evocative titles of Surrealism. The evolution of art, towards a synesthetic and total body experience, also contributed to the isolation of the power of language: “in the modern need to bring art back to its foundations, its 'alphabet' and its means, the effort to separate and purify it from any previous

⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*

⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 26.

⁵² *Ibidem.*

⁵³ *Ibidem.*

knowledge and any literary or conceptual constraint is also reflected”⁵⁴. The divergence between art and literature was growing significantly, until finding an extraordinary climax in the work of Magritte, in whose works the titles even contradict the visible, as in the *Trahison des images*, 1929.

Henri Matisse expressed some concerns regarding the proximity art/literature: “many people like to think of painting as an appendage of literature and therefore want it to express not general ideas suited to pictorial means, but specifically literary ideas”⁵⁵. He was certain that the title is secondary, and it “will only serve to confirm my impression”⁵⁶; painting has progressively distanced itself from written texts: “The object of painting is no longer narrative description, since that is in books”⁵⁷.

Although it is possible to document partially the reflections of the artists in this period, not much attention has been given of the history of titling in movements such as *Impressionism* and *Post Impressionism*, for which an extended, entirely dedicated study would be needed. Yeazell for example suggests that Paul Cézanne’s titles were given by fellow artists. Regarding the paragraphs dedicated to Pablo Picasso’s works, the author notes that titles were sometimes assigned by Picasso’s dealer, Daniel Henry Kahnweiler, though some of them were, according to her, “presumably derived from the artist’s inscription on the verso of the canvas”⁵⁸. In 1946 Picasso affirmed that he was not tiling his works, being critical towards “the mania of art dealers, art critics, and collectors for

⁵⁴ Gottfried Boehm, *Bildbeschreibung*, quot., p. 192.

⁵⁵ Henri Matisse, “Notes of a painter”, in Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, Dutton, 1978, p. 35.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ Henri Matisse, “Interview with Charles Estienne”, 1909, in Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, quot., p. 48.

⁵⁸ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., chapter 1.

christening pictures”⁵⁹. He also later added that “a painting, for me, speaks by itself; what good does it do, after all, to impart explanations? A painter has only one language”⁶⁰. It seems that Picasso was directly aiming at works of art without title⁶¹.

An in-depth study of the titling processes of this timeframe is missing, although some authors’ choices have been analysed by Yeazell and Welchman⁶². A dedicated research could be carried out on the titling practice of each single artist: every title, potentially, deserves an in-depth study regarding its author and formation. It is clear, from Yeazell’s study, in particular in chapter seven, that various agents have been involved in the practice of titling, as in the case of the art dealer Ambroise Vollard, who changed the title according to what subject was more popular at a certain time, or accordingly to what the market demanded or the client potentially desired. These titles might still be present in private or public collections.

Artists’ reluctance to name works was well manifest in Henri Matisse, who explicitly criticized the idea itself of the subject matter⁶³:

Such a man might be expected to maintain a close silence on his art,

⁵⁹ Pablo Picasso, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, ed. Dore Ashton, Viking, 1972, quoted after Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., Kindle edition, chapter 1.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ It is possible to document various untitled in Picasso’s career. In the present thesis his case has not been researched on, as it would deserve a monographic, inclusive and dedicated study, due to the major scale of his production, and the massive movements and change of ownerships his works have been subjected to.

⁶² John Welchman, *Invisible Colors: A Visual History of Titles*, quot. Sometimes it is possible to retrieve information about the titles in the prologue or the introductory notes of catalogue raisonnés, in which the authors are somehow forced to take into account the issue of titles.

⁶³ Matisse: “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter”, in Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, quot., p. 9.

to consider verbalization about painting at best, futile, at worst, wasteful. And when he sat down in 1908, at the age of thirty-nine, to write his first public statement about his art, he evidently could not himself escape that feeling: 'A painter who addresses the public not in order to present his works but to reveal some of his ideas on the art of painting, exposes himself to several dangers. [...] I am fully aware that a painter's best spokesman is his work' [...] Thirty-four years later, at the age of seventy-three, he would tell a radio interviewer that his advice to young painters was: 'First of all you must cut off your tongue because your decision takes away from you the right to express yourself with anything but your brush'.⁶⁴

These sentences by Matisse are extremely relevant, as they also highlight how the title was not used as an exploratory tool, rather as a reflective moment, following the completion of the work.

The diffusion of the titling practice also led to a new labelling of “of the antique as a function of art historical study and the commercial dissemination”⁶⁵: it is therefore possible to assume that a large number of titles was generated due to the growth of the antiques market and all the connected operational assets.

The aim of the present research is not to precisely to date the beginning of the titling practice, as it did not take place globally and at the same time: the standardization of the title as an essential feature became a fact only with the creation and consequent opening of museums, which took place in fragmented and not-homogenous circumstances. Attention is rather posed on the powers, implications, and significance titles have acquired. Another issue is centred on the relation between the title and the work of art: are titles external to the

⁶⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁵ John C. Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, quot., p. 2.

works, or they belong to them? What happens if they are physically part of the works, written directly on the surface or on the verso?

1.2. Implications of a title

The present research is clearly situated in the framework of analysis of the wider context of the relationship artwork - spectator, which in the course of art history has on various occasions been complicated, and often its balance has been violated on one side, or the other. This relation is manifold, multi-layered, and definitely evolving: “responding to a painting complements the making of one, and spectator stands to artist as reader to writer in a kind of spontaneous collaboration”⁶⁶. Titles are always present as a codified language, a combination of letters or numbers, and there has been no trace of a title being an image or a colour: artists have not been particularly creative in this sense, also due to the extremely strict requirements of the format of the labels, as well as the standardization of the practice. The following reflections apply to titles in general, and they touch upon many aspects relevant also for what concerns the untitled title.

The nature of titles has been subject to various discussions, some scholars believing that their role is purely as indicators, if not serving administrative functions as described in the previous paragraphs, others affirming that the “unique purpose of titling is hermeneutical”⁶⁷, indeed “titles do affect interpretation: “They tell us how to look at a work”⁶⁸. John Fisher well noted the issues titles present:

The titling problem is not just a practical concern about the psychological impact of words, or facility of identification, or

⁶⁶ Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of a Common Place. A Philosophy of Art*, Harvard Press, 1981, p. 119.

⁶⁷ John Fisher, “Entitling”, quot., p. 288.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 292.

cataloguing consistency [...] It is a part of the larger issue of interpretation, an issue which is undoubtedly the central problem of any conceptual dealing with works of art today. The complexity of the relation of titles to interpretation should not be obscured by some of the facile examples and the frequent excursiveness of this essay. Nevertheless, for all of its hermeneutical difficulties, the relationship itself is inescapable. Not all artworks are titled. Not all artworks need to be titled. But when an artwork is titled, for better or for worse, a process of interpretation has inexorably begun.⁶⁹

Fisher highlighted how the notion of interpretation is extremely complex and problematic in its nature, and how “not all names are titles. Not everything is entitled to be titled, although everything is entitled to be named. Names can be given to anything, but titling calls for some special acknowledgment of value or relationship”⁷⁰. The re-contextualization and the process of affixing a title have, in fact, a huge impact on the works of art. The fact that the author might or might not have selected the title should be clearly noted. Unfortunately, as mentioned before, labels do not currently present any distinctions, any clarifications about the origin of the title⁷¹. Although their role of indicators is substantial, “the title of an artwork is an invariably significant part of that work, which helps determine its character, and not just an incidental frill devoid of import, or a mere label whose only purpose is to allow us to refer to the work and distinguish it from its fellows”⁷².

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 298.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ This could be for example a proposal for the process of labelling in the future, also when it comes to acquisition.

⁷² Jerrold Levinson, “Titles”, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Autumn, 1985, p. 29.

It is particularly difficult to address the notion of a title in general, as this is a “microcosm of the work”⁷³: it touches upon various elements and sometimes even constituents of the work. Titles are “implicated in the signifying capacity of the work, providing a lead term in its descriptive articulation and contextual history”⁷⁴.

It is assumed that artworks have “meanings”: spectators, either through expertise or the process of learning, can find the key to the presumed access to the work:

Artworks [...] are thus schillerized with(in) a multiplicity of meanings awaiting to be disentangled by the viewer. Every time the recipient is invited to ‘solve the puzzle’ he is put in front of. Having stepped inside the notorious ‘White Cube’ (Brian O’Doherty), we are prompted to make sense of the seemingly opaque or hidden meanings the object before us (allegedly: must) contain. It is exactly this unquenchable ambiguity, strikingly obvious in every piece of non-representational art – it invites, intrigues and even implores us to make at least some attempt of interpretation.⁷⁵

How a work is titled “has a significant effect on the aesthetic face it presents and on the qualities we correctly perceive in it”⁷⁶.

Sometimes, as in the case of Dadaism or Surrealism, it seemed possible even to witness a “turn the visual arts into a ‘language’ whose grammar and syntax must be ‘read,’”⁷⁷: the title being “an index to what

⁷³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Titles. Paraphrases on Lessing”, in *Notes to literature*, Vol. II, Columbia University, 1992, p. 4.

⁷⁴ John C. Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, quot., p. 1.

⁷⁵ Thorn-R. Kray, “Nothing Left to See”, quot., p. 238.

⁷⁶ Jerrold Levinson, “Titles”, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, quot, p. 29.

⁷⁷ Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999, p. 287.

is in the painting"⁷⁸, as Greenberg has noted in the quoted text *Towards a Newer Laocoön*. Consider for example all the meanings, and subsequent analysis, conveyed by the title *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, also known as *The Large Glass (Le Grand Verre)*, 1915-1923: even the number of letters present in the title has been considered fundamental for the understanding of the work⁷⁹, as if it had a gnoseological role. In these art movements the title has been widely considered central for the perception of the work and it truly became part of it.

The instrumentalization of the title of the picture, complete in the development of avant-garde art, [...] using the example of Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst was the most obtrusive, [with] a growing overload of title meaning.⁸⁰

Taken to an extreme, works almost became an appendix of the title, as it happened with the group of *The Incoherents* in the 1880s, some of their works and illustrations anticipated many of the reflections of the Dada movement. Consider for example the monochromes of Alphonse Allais: the monochrome white one, titled *the First Communion of Anaemic Young Girls In The Snow* (1883), or another monochrome in red, titled *Tomato harvest by apoplectic cardinals at the edge of the Red Sea* (1882).

The international exhibitions of *Surrealism*, that took place between 1925 and 1942 can record the presence of artists using significantly the power of titles, such as René Magritte, Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp, (*The rope dancer accompanies herself with her shadows*, 1918, by Man Ray; *Heredity*

⁷⁸ F. David Martin, "Naming Paintings", quot., p. 254.

⁷⁹ Jack Burnham, "Duchamp's Bride Stripped Bare: The Meaning of the Large Glass", in *The Great Western Salt Works: Essays on the Meaning of Post-Formalist Art*, New York, 1974, pp. 89-117.

⁸⁰ Sukmo Kim, *Bildtitel, Eine Kunstgeschichte des Bildtitels*, Verlag Dr. Kovac, Hamburg, 2015, p. 239.

of *Acquired Characteristics*, 1938 by Yves Tanguy), among others. Particularly interesting is the display of “familiar objects”, “natural objects interpreted”, “found objects”, “children drawings”, “African and Oceanian objects”: classifications that almost seem like titles. These artists expressed some concerns about the immediately precedent trends, towards which they were reacting: “in the modern period, painting, for instance, was until recently pre-occupied almost exclusively with expressing the manifest relationships [...] leaving only the extravagant attention to exterior details”⁸¹. According to Breton, the introduction and increasing use of photography, with its mechanical reproduction of reality, pushed forward the attention to the exteriority and the appearance of reality. The only space left open for investigation was subsequently the “purely mental representation [due to] the necessity of expressing internal perception visually” – “the art of imitation has had its days”⁸². Therefore, the focus on the inner self was accompanied by titles that could better express this not apparent, not visible dimensions: the artwork had to be experienced according to “its imaginative scope, its intimate revelations”⁸³.

Titles in general “serve as clues to the complex symbolism of the objects and events represented”⁸⁴. Fundamental in this regard is Danto’s text *Transfiguration of a Common Place, A Philosophy of Art*, 1981. According to the author, it is possible to assume that “a title is more than a name; frequently it is a direction for interpretation or reading, which may not always be helpful, as when someone perversely gives the title

⁸¹ André Breton, *Surrealism*, The English catalogue, 1936, p. 6.

⁸² *Ivi*, p. 7.

⁸³ *Ivi*, p. 13.

⁸⁴ F. David Martin, *Naming Paintings*, quot., p. 252.

‘The Annunciation’ to a painting of some apples”⁸⁵. It often happened that “titling is used as a device to add importance to a trivial execution. And, sadly, it is not unheard-of interpreters to be so obsessed with titles that they ignore the work”⁸⁶, up to the point that sometimes “interpretation doesn’t need a work, just a title”⁸⁷.

Some of the strategies of titling have been analysed by F. David Martin, although, as it will be demonstrated in the second chapter, titles “are so varied and inconsistent that classification is futile”⁸⁸. Other authors have tried to categorize them: “Most titles are synecdochic, in so far as they must fix upon some part of a larger whole, and many are metonymic, in the Jakobsonian sense that they connote an entity by one of its attributes”⁸⁹. Some titles are also used to define series, such as Willem de Kooning’s *Women*, done in the 1950s. Martin defined some categories of titles used by abstract painters, which for example define the medium, feelings, emotional states, specific times or seasons, naturalistic associations, building structures, musical elements, spiritual dimensions; sometimes they used terms that “lead us to read into the abstract forms objects and events that we would not see without the title”⁹⁰. Some of these titles are constituted of class names that could serve only to identify categories of what the works were, as for example oil painting, watercolour and so on. The language of this kind, of self-evident, self-manifest identities (an oil painting is titled oil painting)

⁸⁵ Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of a Common Place, A Philosophy of Art*, Harvard University, 1981, p. 2.

⁸⁶ John Fisher, “Entitling”, quot., p. 294.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ F. David Martin, “Naming Paintings”, quot., p. 253.

⁸⁹ Harry Levin, “The Title as a Literary Genre”, quot., p. xxxiv.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

could be defined apodictic, as Julia Bryan-Wilson described⁹¹. Martin also tried to suggest how useful it would be if works of art should be titled according to their content, but every act of discerning the subject of a painting cannot be separated from an interpretational analysis and it is a subjective, time and cultural specific process: “to see any representation requires projection. But we distinguish between projection the artist intended and other associations. Disagreements about iconography are often bitter”⁹². Moreover, there is always a participation requested from the side of the person who observes: “abstraction, even more than illusion, can never reside solely in the intention of the artist, but also must be in the eye of the beholder”⁹³: an act of cooperation, although not directly acknowledged.

The title, as belonging to language, opens many issues, “what is not arguable is that a title is a verbal construct, ontologically ostracized in the presence of music or painting”⁹⁴, especially because apparently “the work of art remains unchanged despite how we finally decide to designate it”⁹⁵. Although it is true that titles do not alter physically the work, as they are “extrinsic to the material they identify”⁹⁶, they change semantically the status of the object, and they can ontologically define the identity of the work. Together with the re-contextualization, the renaming of the *objet trouvé*, for instance, transforms completely the nature of an item.

⁹¹ Annette Michelson, “Morris, An Aesthetics of Transgression”, in Julia Bryan-Wilson, *October Files*, No. 15, MIT, 2013, p. 11.

⁹² David Carrier, “Gombrich on Art Historical Explanations”, in *Leonardo*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Spring 1983, p. 9.

⁹³ Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, Bollingen Foundation, 2006, p. 31.

⁹⁴ Steven G. Kellman, *Dropping Names: The Poetics of Titles*, quot., p. 153.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 152.

Titles have been described as being fundamental in their hermeneutical role and “mimetic to the meaning of the work itself”⁹⁷, however, the entire notion of the meaning of a work of art should be challenged and revisited, as it operates on a clear shift of languages, on the visual, the verbal and the semantical point of view. Sometimes titles were even recognized to have an ontological power⁹⁸. Although major changes in the XX century art have required a multilayered approach to works of art, the definition of them as “physical structures that convey meanings”⁹⁹ is highly problematic, as it will be discussed in the following paragraphs. Frank Stella and Ad Reinhardt’s words express the difficulties in defining the limits of the artistic experience, does it end with the form or is that just a vehicle?

Frank Stella: My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever it is that he’s doing. He is making a thing. All that should be taken for granted. If the painting were lean enough, accurate enough, or right enough, you would just be able to look at it. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion...is what you see.

GLASER: That doesn’t leave too much afterwards, does it?

STELLA: I don’t know what else there is. It’s really some- thing if you can get a visual sensation that is pleasurable, or worth looking at, or enjoyable, if you can just make some- thing worth looking at.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Valentina Cabassi, *La rinuncia al titolo. Il fenomeno del Senza titolo in arte contemporanea*, MA Thesis, University of Ca Foscari, 2011-2012.

⁹⁸ John Hollander, “Haddock’s Eyes: A Note on Theory of Titles” quot., p. 213.

⁹⁹ Tiziana Andina, *Filosofie dell’arte. Da Hegel a Danto*, Carocci Editore, 2019, p. 55.

¹⁰⁰ “Questions To Stella And Judd”, interview by Bruce Glaser, edited By Lucy R. Lippard, published in *Art News*, September 1966, and reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, Edited By University Of California Press, 1968, p. 6.

Ad Reinhardt highlighted the projective faculty of perception:

Ad Reinhardt: There is nothing there. What you see is not what you see. What you see is nothing. Nothing but shapes, lines, colors. What you see is whats in your mind. What you see is something somebody told you to look for. Look out for anything you see! Watch it! Watch out! Take care! Don't leap before you look out.¹⁰¹

The necessity of titles has also been questioned: “despite the painstaking care nineteenth-century artists employed in selecting titles”¹⁰², it is possible to assess that they are “certainly not indispensable to the aesthetic experience”¹⁰³. In order to support this vision, it is sufficient to consider how consistent is the amount of works titled in extremely simple terms, as for example the endless amount of “Painting, Design, Composition or Collage”¹⁰⁴, somehow “class titles”, as mentioned above. According to Adorno, who was reflecting upon about the relationship between visual arts and literature, in these cases works “regularly excuse themselves by appealing to the technique used, [...] as though they possessed the cogency of universalia ante rem as well as hermetic boldness. Technique is a means, not an end”¹⁰⁵. The common reluctance of artists to speak in detail about meanings or layers of works of art can be summarized in Jackson Pollock's sentence: “She-Wolf came into existence because I had to paint it. Any attempt on my part to say

¹⁰¹ Ad Reinhardt, in *Ad Reinhardts Papers*, Archives of American Art, microfilm no. N/69-103, frame no. 268.

¹⁰² Steven G. Kellman, *Dropping Names: The Poetics of Titles*, quot., p. 156.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ *Ivi*, p. 158.

¹⁰⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Titles*, quot., p. 4.

something about it, to attempt explanation of the inexplicable, could only destroy it"¹⁰⁶.

Titles, from being complementary, have also been considered as a threat, potentially leading to the disempowerment of works of art. If the title gained more evidence than the work itself, it would cause the artwork to be unstable, as to depend upon another kind of language, which is the verbal. Michel Foucault has discussed the relationship artwork – title, describing “this immense distance, which keeps us from being able to be, at one and the same time, reader and spectator”¹⁰⁷. The reading of a title, as a matter of fact, cannot happen contemporarily with the vision and experience of the artwork, so these two moments are perceptively demarcated. Little research has been carried out on the impact on perception that titles have, should titles be read before or after seeing works of art? In these sense artists have rarely expressed any reflections or any guidelines.

Susan Sontag, in her essay *Against Interpretation*, has clearly described “the odd vision by which something we have learned to call ‘form’ is separated off from something we have learned to call ‘content’, and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory”¹⁰⁸. Her reflection, in fact, questions the notion that works should be “understood”: the content, according to her, cannot be distinguished from the form. But the reading of the label of a work of art, however close to the work could be situated, precedes or follows the experience of the work, and it can never happen, as Foucault has expressed, exactly contemporarily. The issue resembles the impossibility

¹⁰⁶ Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944, p. 112.

¹⁰⁷ Michel Foucault, “Ceci n'est pas une pipe”, in *October*, No.1, 1976, p. 14.

¹⁰⁸ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Farrar, 1964, p. 2.

of experiencing at the same time what Ernst Gombrich¹⁰⁹ defined as surface and depth, medium and subject, a relationship that is exclusive, and cannot occur contemporarily. The interpretation of artworks, that often occurs through the mediation of the title, represents a highly complicated activity that often “poisons our sensibilities. Hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art”¹¹⁰. The title in this case, although Sontag did not refer to it directly, seems also to draw on the idea of meaning of an artwork: “To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings’”¹¹¹. The title could be seen as an obstacle, especially as in modern times “interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. By reducing the work of art to its content and one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable”¹¹². Indeed, the process of signification of artworks has led to a “logocentric empire building”¹¹³. Sontag’s reflection follows the analysis of Richard Rorty¹¹⁴ who characterized the occurred changes with the definition of “linguistic turn”, to the point that “society is a text” where “paintings, photographs, sculptural objects, and architectural monuments are fraught with

¹⁰⁹ Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Phaidon, 1960.

¹¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 17.

¹¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹¹² *Ibidem*.

¹¹³ James A. W. Heffernan, “Resemblance, Signification and Metaphor in the Visual Arts”, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Winter, 1985, p. 167. Logocentrism is here used in its literal meaning and not in its philosophical interpretation.

¹¹⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, 1979; Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago University Press, 1967.

‘textuality’ and ‘discourse’”¹¹⁵. In particular the Untitled title could be seen as an attempt of “resistance of the visual arts to the linguistic turn”¹¹⁶, a term that was defined by Rorty in 1967. Images have their own logic, which can be considered as a “coherent production of meaning through authentically figurative means”¹¹⁷. How the iconic production of meaning works is a mechanism depending on subjectivity and personal experiences. The historical, philosophical, distinction between form and content brings along numerous consequences for what concerns creative works, consider, for example, any written sign used in the framework of music or the words that constitute a poem, can these be considered forms? It seems evident that in visual arts the concept of form, that at a first sight could consist for example in the arrangement of colors, is not so univocally distinguishable. Anyhow, this distinction, form – content, brings along numerous consequences:

whenever we use the notion of form [...] we are forced to resort to the assumption of a source of meaning. And the source or medium of this assumption is necessarily the language of metaphysics. That language has been, as well, the language of our art criticism, and its presuppositions the source of its proliferating claims for art as ‘saying’, ‘expressing’, ‘embodying’, ‘bodying forth’, ‘incarnating’, ‘hypostasising’, ‘symbolising’, ‘dramatising’, when it is not ‘figuring’, ‘presenting’, or ‘representing’. It was in order to dispel or to attenuate the persistent implication of the ‘referent’, the reality assumed as prior to the created reality of the work of art, that the term of ‘formal statement’, so constantly in use throughout the American criticism of the ‘40s and ‘50s, was devised. Assuming somewhat less than had been assumed by such a term as ‘significant form’, it was the invention

¹¹⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, “The Pictorial Turn”, in *Artforum*, 1994, March 1992, pp. 89-91.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁷ Gottfried Boehm, *Jenseits der Sprache?*, quot., p. 107.

of a generation dedicated to the proposition that the burden of discourse and reference had been lifted from the artist, as from the writer. Actually, it had been shifted. The formal 'statement', speaking of art alone, confronts us once again with the shadow of the 'subject'. We have proceeded, as through a hall of mirrors, towards the aesthetic Utopia of a self-referring system of signs, constructed on a single level of articulation, looking backwards all the while through our language, to the 'subject'.¹¹⁸

If the works were analysed through their message or content, then they would be seen, and interpreted, purely as visual metaphors: "Whatever art is, it is, and criticism, which is language, is something different. Language comes to terms with art by creating parallel structures or transposing, both of which are less than adequate"¹¹⁹.

The title opens up many issues for discussion: does it provide a more appropriate way through which to look at the work of art? Does the fact that it is defined, if so, by the author, makes it more relevant according to the "claim of the author's 'intention' upon the critic's judgment"¹²⁰, or upon the public perception? This argument can be described as intentional fallacy, namely the belief that if the title is defined by the author, *i.e.* it is intentional, it has more authority. The comparison of titles in art with the role of titles in poetry is extremely accurate, as "a poem should not mean but be"¹²¹. Not much reflection has been posed on this fact in art criticism, but it is possible to transpose some considerations from literary criticism: "the design or intention of the

¹¹⁸ Annette Michelson, *Robert Morris, An Aesthetics of Transgression*, quot, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ Mel Bochner, "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism" in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: a critical anthology*, University of California, 1995, p. 93.

¹²⁰ W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy", in *The Sewanee Review*, Jul. - Sep., 1946, Vol. 54, No. 3, Jul. - Sep., 1946, p. 468.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*.

author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art"¹²². However, "in order to judge the poet's [the artist ed.] performance, we must know what he intended. Intention is design or plan in the author's mind. Intention has obvious affinities for the author attitude toward his work, the way he felt"¹²³. It seemed that for many authors there was no better way to transmit the intention of a work of art, if not through the title. Is the title the way in which artists make explicit their intention? As the popularity of artists' interviews and declarations, as well as their public engagement, raised, nowadays it seems possible to find other ways to express their motives and narratives, not only through the practice of titling. Can the title still be considered a fundamental tool in this communication process? Is the public a kind of judge, as Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley asked themselves, who has to interpret a text written by an author and consequently define the meaning? These authors believed that "the poem [read work of art ed.] belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge"¹²⁴. Once that the work of art is public, it is not anymore under the govern of the author, if not through the title, which travels close to it¹²⁵ and deeply affects its perception, like a control device. It is relevant that with the affixation of titles, authors seem "no differently than literary critics"¹²⁶, "if art is intuitive, they are discursive"¹²⁷, as they seem if not to describe and to determine, to suggest, to evoke or even to confuse. Jerrold Levinson has written how

¹²² *Ibidem*.

¹²³ *Ibidem*

¹²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 471.

¹²⁵ With exceptions, as titles, as it will be demonstrated, often are not produced by the respective authors.

¹²⁶ Steven G. Kellman, *Dropping Names: The Poetics of Titles*, quot., p. 155.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*.

titles are essential for the transmission of artworks: they are “often integral part of them, constitutive of what such works are [...] plausibly essential properties of them in many cases”¹²⁸. These considerations perhaps are true for certain works of art, but cannot be fully extended to all of them, in fact their roles, also in the same art movement, as in the case of Abstract Expressionism, can be seen as dramatically inhomogeneous.

Although titles are fundamental in the management processes of works of art, as for example administration, acquisition and cataloguing, they have a major impact once they are physically associated with the works, thanks to the display. Titles must also be considered within the context of exhibition production, as they must be included in the textual dimension of “press releases, announcement cards, checklists, catalogues”¹²⁹, elements that would be considered, according to the definition of Gerard Genette, “paratexts”¹³⁰. In the brilliantly written *Exhibition Prosthetics*, Grigely interrogated himself about the multiple narratives art shows manage to forge:

If exhibitions involve “showing,” they also involve a process by which the act of showing is subsumed by the act of telling — of constructing narratives that elide distinctions between words and images, or between artifacts and artificions. The question is — does it matter? Does it matter how museums narrate, describe, and otherwise footnote the objects they display? Or as Philippe Parreno stated in a recent text-based work: “What do you believe, your eyes or my words?”¹³¹

¹²⁸ Jerrold Levinson, “Titles”, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Autumn 1985, quot., p. 29.

¹²⁹ Joseph Grigely, *Exhibition Prosthetics*, Bedford Press, 2009, pp. 6-7.

¹³⁰ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation*, Cambridge, 1997.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*.

Grigely's reflections pose attention on the authority of words in relation to the display of works. It is therefore necessary not to consider the public as observers, rather it makes more sense to refer to an "audience of readers, viewers, and listeners".¹³² Are titles integral to a work of art or can they be considered "exhibition prosthetics", as Grigely noted? The same definition of prosthetics means, according to his reconstruction, that the part comes a piece of the body it is attached to, but it is clearly identifiable.

All the considerations so far described are connected with the title as well as with the lack of it, the untitled title. It is possible to assume that the untitled title as such always existed, due to the lack of the title as an integrant element of the artwork, but the focus of the present study is the Untitled title in the XX century. This term is interpreted, according to the analysis fostered by this research, as a title, consequence of a conscious and significant decision, directly taken by the artist.

¹³² *Ibidem.*

1.3. Ambiguities of the untitled title

Unfortunately, the language of records and inventories, whether museums, galleries or auction houses, has not been equipped with the possibility of distinguishing the various cases of the untitled title: not a univocal field has been identified and standardized to fully denote the lack of title of an artwork. This means that there is, as a matter of fact, no titular differentiation between the untitled title as indication of absence of a recorded title and the Untitled tile interpreted as the chosen title of a work of art¹³³. Untitled title is therefore a very ambiguous term, which presents different issues.

The aim of these paragraphs is to identify the reasons why works of art are titled untitled, subsequently to define the area of the present investigation. Although it is not possible to determine with complete accuracy and exhaustiveness all the possible circumstances that led works of art to be untitled, considering all the possible and sometimes untraceable causations, what follows is an attempt to introduce some of the main grounds.

The progressive inclusion of artworks in collections, due to the growth of the global market, have forced works of art to acquire names, even if in some cases they were not meant to detain one, or at least the author did not conceive one. Quite often entire *corpora* of artists production were nameless: perhaps the artist did not conceive them as works, nevertheless preparatory drawings, sketches and in general works realized on more ephemeral surfaces came into public domain. In

¹³³ In some records it is possible to see Untitled in inverted commas, “Untitled”, which could be read as the actual title of a work of art, but this is not a defined and recognized standard. A possible distinction could for example use the untitled as generic proof of lack of title and then Untitled as a proper title, which is in use in the present thesis.

the lack of an authorial definition, these kinds of items were sometimes titled untitled by who subsequently took possession of the objects. In other cases, these works were simply given descriptive titles, for the purpose of identification. These titles, as documented in the first paragraphs, cannot anyhow be considered fully objective or neutral. This process affected also works of art that were not conceived to be seen nor exposed to the public display or meant to enter the art market. Another reason of the presence of the untitled title is the fact that quite frequently the artists organize their production in series. The title of the series might be established, leaving its components untitled.

Another cause of the presence of the untitled title is that the work might be unfinished, as for example the work by Salvador Dalí, untitled, 1981¹³⁴, to which a description, “unfinished”, has been added. Regarding the non-completeness of a work of art, which in modern and contemporary art is a particular complex subject, there could be possible indicators, as for example the lack of signature (in case of course the artist is used to sign the works), lack of date (in case of course the artist is used to date the works), or evident and recognizable not finiteness of the piece.

The work might be titled untitled as it might have lost its title, sometimes for to the physical loss of written information that accompanied the work itself. In some cases, as for example for many works by Yves Tanguy, the title reads Unknown Title¹³⁵. Titles could also

¹³⁴ Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. In some cases of Dalí’s works the Untitled title is followed by a title, as in *Untitled, Persistence of Fair Weather*, 1932, leading to even more uncertainty.

¹³⁵ In the catalogue of the exhibition titled *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage*, March 27 - June 9, 1968, New York, MoMA, it is possible to find many examples of works, whose title reads “Title Unknown”.

have been intentionally removed, in order for example to delete the possibility of immediate identification of a certain subject.

The Untitled title as an authorial choice is at the core of this research. Three main criteria, also in possible combination, have been considered fundamental in recognizing the Untitled title as an authentic and authorial, intended as determined by the artist, feature of the artworks: first of all the exhibition of the work titled Untitled during the lifetime of the artist, therefore in a way that he/she could directly witness and control the information; secondly, the multiple presence of the Untitled title, therefore a coherent and motivated decision by the artist; thirdly, the direct reflections of the artist on the title Untitled, whether in the form of declarations, notes or interviews. Among the many cases analysed in the second and third chapter, the Untitled title assumes more meanings in case it is a consistent and coherent practice over all the career of the artist, with the presence sometimes of documented intentions of the creator. The Untitled title, as it will be discussed, happens also to be a sporadic element that does not characterize constantly the entire production of an artist, reasons of this choice will also be investigated.

1.4. Reaching the powers of the Untitled title

In general, the title untitled clearly represents a challenge to the *status quo*, according to which works of art have slowly become, over time, supposed to have a title, whatever function this might have. Although, as demonstrated in the previous paragraphs, titles have a recent history, it is generally assumed that each work of art has a title. Also, in case of unknown subjects, as for example the portrait of an unknown man, the title assigned would be "Portrait of a man", usually accompanied by every noticeable detail useful for distinction and possibly also for future identification. Countless are the examples, as *Portrait of a Man* (1476) by Antonello da Messina, *Portrait of a man* (1580-90) by Annibale Carracci, *Portrait of a young boy* (1527) by Rosso Fiorentino, *Portrait of a male figure* (1548) by Hans Mielich, *Portrait of a gentleman* (1725) by Vittore Ghislandi Fra Galgario, *Portrait of a man in armor* (1596) by Pier Maria Bagnadore, or *Man in armor* (1530) by Tiziano Vecellio, *Portrait of girl with hat* (1808) by Jean-Baptiste Isabey, among many others. Even some unfinished works are titled, as in the case of *Portrait of a young man* (1530-1540) by Daniele da Volterra. The fact that the traces of the identity of these subjects have been lost in time is not sufficient to claim that these are untitled works. Their authors, in fact, could not define titles, as titles simply did not exist at the time of realization, therefore they cannot be considered untitled pieces. In fact, the Untitled as a title emerged only in the XX century, when the evolutions of modernity accentuated both the role of the author and the powers of the title, up to the point of paradoxically transforming it into an Untitled title.

The idea of the lack of a name, of something not nameable, or someone named no-one, or somewhere named no-where has teased the mind of many authors, across many disciplines and across different epochs, from

Homerus' Odysseus, who declared his name to be *Mr. Nobody* in front of Polyphemus, to Beckett's *Innomable*, with an unnamed (presumably unnameable) character as the protagonist. The nameless status is also described in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found there*, in particular in the passage presenting "the wood where things have no names"¹³⁶, "a semiotic chaos where nothing is signified because all signifiers have disappeared"¹³⁷. The blurred, indefinite dimension of the untitled title clearly represents a stalemate, not functional for the identification or any kind of information transmission. The communicative suspension the untitled title brings along has major consequences for what concerns the production and the experience of art. Despite of the imaginable heavy criticism of editors and marketing strategists (this term does not allow a univocal distinction), the Untitled title has been frequently used in poems or music pieces, as well as in literature, at least since the 1960s. Some reflections for what concern these other fields will be useful to better present the Untitled title in visual arts.

Although titles can be considered useful for a multitude of actions, for what concerns the present study their display in the context of a label holds major importance. Rightly when displayed, it is possible to state that the untitled title breaks the conventions, as it grants the work of art to evade definitive interpretations. Moreover, the choice of this title can also be considered as a reaction towards the phenomena of production – consumption of the works: "it is a true revolution not to be able to read the work of art directly by its description"¹³⁸. The decryption of the image through the title is, indeed, postponed and extended until

¹³⁶ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass And What Alice Found There*, 1871, Kindle edition, chapter 3.

¹³⁷ Harry Levin, "The Title as a Literary Genre", quot., p. xxiii.

¹³⁸ Marcia Tucker, *Robert Morris*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970, p. 9.

ever, in the absence of any verbal clues. The Untitled title can also be considered as a subtle challenge to the institutional framework, in fact this term emerged, as it will be demonstrated in the next two chapters, in particular historical and social circumstances. It hijacks and threatens the possibility of easily and univocally distinguishing the artwork, forcing a reference to other details, as for example the year, measurements or inventory numbers.

An interesting reflection on the issue of titling and the Untitled title is offered by Joan Miró, in his numerous letters to his art dealer Pierre Matisse. His insights are particularly precious: firstly, they openly indicate how important titles were; secondly, they describe how his art dealer was actually choosing them: “If I may make a small criticism, instead of the title *Composition* (which evokes abstract things in a dogmatic or superficial sense), I would have preferred that you had simply put *Painting*, along with the date of the picture.”¹³⁹. In this sense the title “*Painting*” is apodictic, as the fact that it is a painting is self-evidently true.

Miró was often thinking about the implications of titles:

I have thought a lot about the question of titles. I must confess that I can't find any for the works that take off from an arbitrary starting point and end with something real. In the past I have given titles to my works, but they always seemed like a joke. However, I give you permission to choose titles based on the real things my works might suggest to you, provided these titles do not evoke some tendency or other, something I want to avoid completely: “*composition*” for example (which evokes the *Abstraction- Creation* group), or literary titles in the Surrealist manner. For the other pastels I am now doing, I

¹³⁹ Joan Miró, “Letter to Pierre Matisse”, Barcelona, Pasaje Credito, 4 February 7, 1934, published in Jacques Dupin, *Joan Miró*, 1994, Harry N. Adams, p. 124.

will give titles, since they are based on reality – but the titles will be unpretentious and very ordinary: figure, personage, figures, personages.¹⁴⁰

Can titles be without any pretensions? Titles in general have various connotations, often indelible:

You see that I have given titles, very simple ones, however, since I wanted to remain within pure painting, at the same time going beyond it, of course. [...]

I am therefore totally removed from the ideas – Freudian, theoretical, etc., etc., etc., etc., etc., - that people apply to my work. If my work exists, it is in a human and living way, with nothing literary or intellectual about it – which is the sign of a stillborn and rotten thing, destined to disappear almost immediately.¹⁴¹

The titling procedure also might present a hazard to works of art: “When the descriptions do not produce the thing [...] they seem to reduce themselves to something additional and imperfect, with a diminished cognitive value”¹⁴².

In these sentences it is definitely possible to record a strong criticism towards the excess of reference to literature or, more in general, towards works heavily based on the linguistic dimension. In fact, in case titles hold major importance “the logic of the image is simply the placeholder of another completely different logic, that of graphé”¹⁴³, with the risk of

¹⁴⁰ Joan Mirò, “Letter to Pierre Matisse” Montroig, October 12, 1934, in Jacques Dupin, *Matisse on Art*, quot., p. 135.

¹⁴¹ Joan Mirò, “Letter to Pierre Matisse”, Barcelona, Pasaje Crédito 4, December 17, 1934, in Jacques Dupin, *Matisse on Art*, quot., p. 125.

¹⁴² Gottfried Boehm, *Bildbeschreibung. Über di Grenzen von Bild und Sprache*, quot., p. 190.

¹⁴³ Gottfried Boehm, *Jenseits der Sprache?*, quot, p. 111.

reducing the image as mere vehicle. It seems that Miró was thinking of “class titles”, in order not to impact on the experience of the spectator. In the 1930s also other artists were looking for a non-suggestive system to entitle the works, as for example Hans Hartung, who, after 1932, titled his works with “T” (standing for *tableau*), the year, plus a letter, a system useful for identification purposes.

The antagonism towards referential titles started to grow with Abstract art and became more and more consistent in the 1940s. In particular, according to some artists affiliated with Abstract Expressionism, as it will be demonstrated in the second chapter, the Untitled title reflected “the attempt to have, in the ordinary sense, no content”¹⁴⁴. Only in certain conditions, that will be presented here, “the work can be...just what it is”.¹⁴⁵ But, as it will be discussed, each artist had different perspectives on the topic, and in the same art movement it is possible to document very different strategies, from Clyfford Still’s abhorrence for titles to Barnett Newman’s frequent use of titles (“I give paintings titles actually because I think they have some meaning. I try in the title to create a metaphor that will in some way correspond to what I think is the feeling in them and the meaning of it”¹⁴⁶).

The growing dimension of art criticism, in fact, “titling permits discourse about art”¹⁴⁷, with the exponential multiplication of journals, the increase of the public attention and the attendance of exhibitions, the broadcast

¹⁴⁴ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”, quot., p. 20.

¹⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 21.

¹⁴⁶ Barnett Newman, interviewed by David Sylvester in 1965, published in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, University of California, 1992, p. 258. His works have also been considered outside the framework of language, although he used very suggestive titles. They have been considered almost as “statements [that ed.] do not have to be explained, they must be understood”, Nicolas Calas, “Subject Matter in the Work of Barnett Newman” reprinted in “Art and Objecthood”, *Art Forum*, Summer 1967, Vol. 5, No. 10.

¹⁴⁷ John Fisher, “Enitling”, quot., p. 289.

of interviews, the penetration of art in everyday life, all this aimed at an approach to art which should be focused on its communicative power and dissemination. The choice of the title *Untitled* can be considered a challenge to all these dimensions. To the work art critics, as it will be more evident in reviews, the renounce to “traditional titles”, brought some significant issues:

Using numbers or purely descriptive titles seems silly and pretentious, but mostly frustrating. ‘Pretentious,’ because the artist seems to be saying, at least to my ear: ‘See here, my images or objects are above language; they transcend what I can say, and, by implication, what you can say about it. I am above it all.’¹⁴⁸

The multiplication itself of the images and their pervasiveness in the 1950s and 1960s led to major changes in the approach to the visual culture, up to having nowadays what has been described as the *homo videns*¹⁴⁹. This overabundance of the purely visual, not text based, dimension led, with other factors, to the definition of the *Iconic turn* or

¹⁴⁸ Art critic Richard Milazzo in a private conversation with the author, February 8, 2021. He also added: “Maybe it is an admission they do not fully understand what they have created because it involved so much intuition rather than Reason or the rational faculty; or they are afraid a title will prematurely limit the range of possible meanings, preferring, indeed, wanting the viewer to respond in as many different ways as possible. In which case, they want the title to function more as a threshold than as a signifier; or, as a half-sign, a linguistic half-breed [...], employing the signifier part of the sign but wanting to delay or retard for as long as possible the signified. Without title is definitely different: to me it means entering the room, even a darkened one, without a stitch of clothing. It is a much more aggressive act of nudity or nakedness: it is more of a directive”.

¹⁴⁹ Giovanni Sartori, *Homo videns. Television and post-thinking*, Laterza, 1997. Although his reflection is mostly focused on television the author is reflecting in general on the power of the visual medium.

Pictorial turn, so named by the studies of Mitchell¹⁵⁰ and Boehm, and the progressive loss of power of the text. The Untitled title can be considered a reaction to fight the massive “encrustations of interpretation”¹⁵¹ works of art were suffering¹⁵² and as a way to deny that “language is paradigmatic for meaning”¹⁵³. The unsettling non-referentiality of the Untitled title requires an effort: words, in Untitled works, silence themselves.

The popular, as well as the academic, designation as *Whistler’s Mother* of the work originally titled *Arrangement in Black and Gray* by Whistler can be seen as “the revenge of a content-oriented bourgeoisie on a devout formalist. To be ‘literary’ is heretical, and the first line of defence must be at the title, hence the abundance of works entitled Untitled”¹⁵⁴. The choice of such an innovative title by Whistler corresponded to the desire of the artist not to have his work being crystallized in a unique point of view. The Untitled as a title potentially avoids that the work is being channeled and confined within a definition, characterization or denomination: “it seems to presume to teach by negation (and a very considerable negation) how it should be viewed. But can the viewer avoid the language of title and its relation to the object, and if so, is the apparent effort actually cancelled by the title itself?”¹⁵⁵

The Untitled title can be considered a reaction towards the growth of a multi-faced and multicultural perspective where a global,

¹⁵⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago Press, 1994 and Gottfried Boehm, *Die Wiederkehr der Bilder*, quot., 1994.

¹⁵¹ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”, quot., p. 19.

¹⁵² Some examples for what concerns Pollock’s works will be analysed in the second chapter.

¹⁵³ W.J.T. Mitchell, “The Pictorial Turn”, in *Artforum*, quot., p. 89.

¹⁵⁴ Steven G. Kellman, *Dropping Names: The Poetics of Titles*, quot., p. 158.

¹⁵⁵ Hazard Adams, “Titles, Titling, and Entitlement to”, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Autumn 1987, p. 13.

unanimous and above all unique interpretation, ceased to exist. The title Untitled favoured the emerging of numerous readings, as the author has not declared, at least through the title, what was there to be seen or also what was not there. On the other side, the use of this term can also be seen as a way to silence art criticism and loudly (paradoxically, through quietness) denouncing its limits. The power of images, in case they are titled Untitled, has, as a consequence

the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.), and that visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality.¹⁵⁶

The Untitled title “instructs us, if only by negation, how to view it”¹⁵⁷, but its use should be contextualized. The growth of exhibitions and of the art market, has been, as mentioned, a very slow and incoherent process, therefore the very first, precise and conscious attribution of the title Untitled to a certain work of art, cannot be documented. Moreover, the presence of untitled works in the beginning of the XX century is problematic, as very often the precise intentions of the authors cannot be documented, did he/she attribute on purpose the title Untitled or is it the result of other conditions or events, as for example the loss of the title? The possibility of documenting the intention of the artist regarding this practice is fundamental. The Untitled title, according to Annette Michelson, also favours the concepts of “presentness and instantaneousness”¹⁵⁸ as the work can, potentially, be continuously and

¹⁵⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, “The Pictorial Turn”, in *Artforum*, quot., p. 92.

¹⁵⁷ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., chapter 1.

¹⁵⁸ Annette Michelson, *Robert Morris, An Aesthetics of Transgression*, quot., p. 16.

endlessly redefined, in its open structure. The anti-linguistical dimension of this term has been given relevance to by John C. Welchman: “The ‘visualist’ refusal of textual and information supplementarity. The image must be the sole arbitrator of various contents it controls – whether formal, aesthetic, or even social”¹⁵⁹. The Untitled title can be therefore seen as a reaction towards “the shadows of the language projected onto the iconic dimension”¹⁶⁰.

If on one side it is definitely possible to measure the growing dimension of art criticism¹⁶¹, on the other, from the point of view of some artists, “the tendency was reversed. The semantic complexity of the titles was opposed to a radical reduction: images were merely numbered or intentionally left untitled”¹⁶². Abstract art, in the first decade of the XX century, with its focus on non-mimetic representation, has had a significant impact on the discourse about art:

It [Abstract art ed.] robbed art commentary of its very substance. There was nothing left to describe anymore: No clouds, trees, animals, buildings or humans populate a typical Rothko Reinhardt, or Newman painting. In the words of Gottfried Boehm: ‘Descriptions of such [abstract, non-mimetic] pictures are no longer dealing with [mythical, religious or political] subjects that allow for them to be narrated or at least comprehended; they encounter an increasingly inconvertible imagination and self-reflexive procedures of composition. Traditional techniques to translate pictures into words and texts into images become ineffective.’¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ John C. Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, quot., p. 334.

¹⁶⁰ Gottfried Boehm, *Jenseits der Sprache?*, quot., p. 111.

¹⁶¹ *ArtReview* was founded in 1949; *Art International* in 1957; *Artforum* in 1962; *Studio International* in 1964; *FlashArt* in 1967; *Avalanche* in 1970; *Art Press* in 1972; *American Art Review* in 1973; *Parachute* in 1974; *Art Monthly* in 1976.

¹⁶² John C. Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, quot., p. 334.

¹⁶³ Thorn-R. Kray, “Nothing Left to See”, quot., p. 232.

The process and practice of signification of artworks, their decryption through words, have been rendered much more complicated by the lack of a recognizable, mimetic content: “The urge towards abstraction has also been, to some extent, an urge to cancel the translation of visual into verbal – namely the ekphrastic proneness to describe and narrate, so often prompted by a recognisable appropriation of elements of the real”¹⁶⁴. As Rosalind Krauss has suggested: “the twentieth century’s first wave of pure abstraction was based on the goal, taken very seriously indeed, to make a work about Nothing”¹⁶⁵. The Untitled title broke the standard mimetic convention of titles that abstract art had already challenged in the beginning of the XX century. Titles have been considered “the surrogate for the vanished subject-matter”¹⁶⁶ and in many cases works of art have been somehow condensed in the ineffable and untranslatable title Untitled.

On one side the inexpressible, the indefinable being Untitled of works of art often offered the critics an imperious arena for content creation: “a stage full of ‘lyrical incantations’, the ‘phrase-mongering’ which more than once produces ‘unintelligible sentences’ often sounding like ‘adjuratory formulae’ and, taken together, ‘ciphers of whateverism’ with a ‘threatening lack of reference’”¹⁶⁷. These texts are so widely present that there is, according to Thorn-R. Kray, even the possibility to doubt that these critics might even need a work of art, perhaps just as departure points. On the other side, as it will be presented in the following chapters,

¹⁶⁴ Rui Carvalho Homem and Maria de Fátima Lambert, *Writing and Seeing Essays on Word and Image*, Rodopi, 2006, p. 15.

¹⁶⁵ Rosalind Krauss, “Reading Jackson Pollock, Abstractly”, in *Originality*, 1982, p. 237.

¹⁶⁶ Arnold Gehlen, *Zeit-Bilder – Zur Soziologie und Ästhetik Moderner Malerei*, Frankfurt, 1960, p. 164, translated by and quoted after Thorn-R. Kray, “Nothing Left to See”, quot., p. 240.

¹⁶⁷ Thorn-R. Kray, “Nothing Left to See”, quot., p. 241.

a growing intolerance towards Untitled works can be documented in Abstract Expressionism in the mid 1940s and in Minimalism, as well as in Arte Povera in the 1960s: “What sort of story, after all, can be told about an art that apparently turns its back on representation, on reference to any object or figure that we might recognize from our experience of the world outside the painting, and that might thereby give us something to talk about?”¹⁶⁸, yet this art “intensifies our compulsion to talk about it, our need to hear someone else talk about it, or both”¹⁶⁹.

The Untitled title, in Abstract Expressionism, might be linked with the dimension of the sublime and the related impossibility to talk about ineffable experiences, in a sort of “cognitive disproportion”¹⁷⁰. Moreover, as Kirk Varnedoe noted, “many sculptors of the time were interested in Merleau Ponty ‘s philosophy of phenomenology, which described experience as constituted by the act of perceiving”¹⁷¹.

The powers of words detained a major importance in Abstract Art and also in Conceptual Art with the “undermining of the traditional idea of an artwork as a single physically present object. A common method of achieving this is to present to the viewer a prompt designed to make her think of some absent thing”¹⁷². Critics, deprived of hints, suggestions, directions, metaphors, have been trying to respond with an “immediate proliferation of new epithets”, “attempts to find historical, formal precedents which might facilitate analysis”, and “a growing

¹⁶⁸ James A.W. Efferman, “Speaking for Pictures, The rhetoric of art criticism”, in *Word & Image. A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, Vol. 15, Issue 1, 1999, p. 26.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁰ Gottfried Boehm, *Die Bilderfrage*, 1994, pp. 325-343, translated in Italian in “La questione delle immagini”, in M. G. Di Monte, *Immagine e Scrittura*, Roma, Meltemi 2006, pp. 43-58.

¹⁷¹ Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing. Abstract Art since Pollock*, introduction.

¹⁷² Peter Goldie, Elisabeth Schellekens, *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 171.

literature about the problematic nature of available critical vocabulary, procedure, standards”¹⁷³.

The Untitled title brings along “in art criticism and also in the language used by artists adjectives as ‘non-relational’, ‘unanalysable’, ‘indescribable’, ‘undifferentiated’, ‘incomparable’, and ‘unintellectual’, ‘anti-rationalistic’, ‘the parts are unrelational’”¹⁷⁴. All terms that give shape to a strong anti-narrative dimension: “the essence of this history is purification: a Hegelian journey to the realm of pure Spirit, or in other words Nothing with a capital N”¹⁷⁵. Nevertheless, the Untitled title seems to offer freedom of interpretation and therefore it can be perceived as a positive and affirmative (although, paradoxically, by negation) gesture¹⁷⁶.

But the Untitled title comes along with a not solvable puzzle, as the silence it evokes is interrupted by the necessity of referring to the same work of art. As a matter of fact, the title, in this case the Untitled title, is usually associated with other verbal information, as the author’s name, the measurements, years and medium, its evocative silence is challenged by the display with all the informative apparatus that it brings along. There is not a standardization¹⁷⁷ in the ways titles are written in the labels. The title Untitled paradoxically

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁴ These elements combined helped to generate what was denominated “Firstness” by Charles Sanders Peirce, which is “somehow absolutely present. It is a purely monadic state of feeling and somehow immediate, without its immediacy being derived by reflection from what is not immediate. It is fresh, free, vivid, original, spontaneous”, in Peter Goldi, *quot.*, p. 171.

¹⁷⁵ Rui Carvalho Homem and Maria de Fátima Lambert, *Writing and Seeing Essays on Word and Image*, *quot.*, p. 27.

¹⁷⁶ James A. W. Efferman, *Speaking for Pictures*, *quot.*, p. 26.

¹⁷⁷ John Fisher, *Entitling*, *quot.*, pp. 286-298. The author noted how there is a lack of standard in the practice of displaying a title, as for example in italics, with capital letter etc.

calls attention to the very relation that it denies. Designed to evade the domination of language over plastic forms, it tacitly accepts that the viewer is already linguistically situated, that the work has a linguistic relation, and that the so-called object is in linguistic relation. Hollander has noted the 'covert titling function of untitled'.¹⁷⁸

This term clearly refuses to answer the question: what does this work represent? Indeed, Untitled works, as it will be demonstrated, might depict recognizable, "nameable" subjects, nevertheless they do not provide a direct answer to the issue of "content" identification. But the Untitled title does not wish to silence the image, as the reading of the work and the interpretation can be based on documentary and historical evidence external to the work itself. The existence of titles also enhances the demarcation form – content, particularly problematic in the developments of Abstract Expressionism, Minimal Art and Land Art, "in which nature is literally present"¹⁷⁹, and the works can be described as "ontological hybrids"¹⁸⁰, according to Andrew Inkpin, as natural elements are the medium of the works. Works of art cannot be reduced to their materiality, although several artists have highlighted the value of the medium, as for example Robert Ryman, as it will be presented in the third chapter. The Untitled title, as an attempt to somehow solve the centuries long quarrel form - content, invite works to "have autonomy from language and develop their own intuitive laws, which would avoid the acts of interpretation that result in allegorization"¹⁸¹.

¹⁷⁸ Hazard Adams, "Titles, Titling, and Entitlement to", quot., p. 13.

¹⁷⁹ Andrew Inkpin, "The Complexities of Abstracting from Nature", in Paul Crowther and Isabel Wünsche, *Meanings of Abstract Art Between Nature and Theory*, Routledge, 2012, p. 259.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸¹ Hazard Adams, "Titles, Titling, and Entitlement to", quot., p. 13.

A concern for titles, labels and the wording around artworks

reflects a central obsession of postmodernism, which has itself consistently been labelled as the exploration of a new relation between art and language. Modernism - at least in Clement Greenberg's classic formulation - sought to evacuate language, literature, narrative, and textuality from the field of visual art.' Post-modern art, not surprisingly, has been defined as the negation of this negation, 'an eruption of language into the aesthetic field'.¹⁸²

The inscrutability of numerous works of art of the 1960s determined an overflow of readings and a proliferation of interpretations: the Untitled title added a layer of a riddle to the perception, by undermining the visual immediacy of the work of art: "Abstraction is a remarkable system of productive reductions and destructions that expands our potential for expression and communication"¹⁸³. Major changes that occurred in the art of the 1960s, tested and challenges the rules, aims and parameters of the institutions, from the moment of acquisition until the display.

¹⁸² W.J.T. Mitchell, "Wall Labels: Word, Image, and Object in the Work of Robert Morris", in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, Guggenheim Museum, 1994, p. 62.

¹⁸³ Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot., p. 41.

1.5. Complexity of relating to an untitled work of art

According to W.J.T. Mitchell “the label offers an expansive metaphor that stands for a whole horizon of thresholds between visibility, textuality, and power”¹⁸⁴, therefore the analysis of labels must consider all these different aspects that intertwine the artist with the spectator, through the influential, written mediation of the formats of the institutions. Although the function of labels seems well defined: “the purpose of in-situ text is to help provide key information and help increase visitors’ understanding of the objects and subjects in museum displays”¹⁸⁵, the actual definition of them is extremely complicated, and is often a result of highly competitive mediation processes between the need to inform and to engage. The balance between these activities has often been violated, affecting the perception of the works of art. Various critics have reflected on the label:

In invoking a space label I have in mind a sort of intellectual space in which the third agent, the viewer, establishes contact between the first and second agents, the maker and the exhibitor. And I use the word label here to denote the elements of naming information, and exposition the exhibitor makes available to the viewer in whatever form: a label is not just a piece of card, but includes the briefing given in the catalogue entry and even selection or lighting that aims to make a point. To attend to this space, it seems to me, is to attend not only to the scene but also to the source of the viewer's activity”¹⁸⁶.

¹⁸⁴ John C. Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, quot., p. 332.

¹⁸⁵ Dawn Hoskin, *Writing Labels & Gallery Text*, Victoria and Albert Museum, October 31, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3ocAt60>, accessed on January 21, 2020.

¹⁸⁶ Michal Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects”, in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of*

Baxandall is emphasizing the labels' pivotal role as a mediator between the productive context of the object, the curatorial management of knowledge within which it is brought forward for display, and the particularities of its reception. Labels have also been described, by Welchman¹⁸⁷, as spaces for interaction and areas of exchange and negotiation between the artist, the spectator and also the curator, it can almost be defined as a space for social exchange.

In the last decades art museum labels have been the subjects of various studies¹⁸⁸, attention has been posed on who their authors should be, their double nature of being informative or interpretative tools and the kind, style of textual information they should provide, just to mention a few points. The visitor-centred approach most museums have fostered has pushed for a recalibration of the service and tools offered to the public, considered more and more participants rather than simply observers, in an attempt to make the fruition of artworks more interactive and engaging. New tools have offered the chance of expanding the access to information, with various depths, formats¹⁸⁹ and devices, as for example audio guides and other digital platforms. Labels

Museum Display, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, Washington, D. C., Smithsonian Institution, 1991, p. 36.

¹⁸⁷ John C. Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, quot., chapter 2.

¹⁸⁸ Various authors have investigated the world of label production, as Beverly Serrell, *Making Exhibit Labels: A Step by Step Guide*, American Association for State and Local History, 1983, and *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2015; George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum*, London, Routledge, 1998, among others.

¹⁸⁹ Exemplary are the interventions and definition of different labels at the Pinacoteca di Brera by the Director James Bradburne and the layering of information at the MONA Museum in Tasmania.

have been considered more and more prone to rise discussion¹⁹⁰, sometimes with attention on sociological, political issues rather than the art historical dimension:

Writing gallery and label text is very different from writing books or scholarly articles. Distilling large amounts of detailed information or research about an object into a succinct, relevant, interesting and widely-accessible label can be a complicated, tricky and at times frustrating task. The use of labels in museums and galleries is a widely debated topic and there are numerous publications, articles and websites that propose and discuss the 'best methods' to use when writing labels.¹⁹¹

From being informative tools “they’re quickly becoming a place to spark debate, rewrite history and acknowledge untold stories”¹⁹². Despite of the extraordinary growth of this kind of research focused on how information (and what information) is conveyed to the visitors through labels, and the sparkling multiplication of museum labels guidelines, very little attention has been given to the title. If doubts accompany dates (mostly in the form of question marks) or authorship (with the form “attributed” or generic “schools”), or provenance (endless are the contributions to this field of research), very rarely titles are presented with the controversies surrounding their origins or their authors. Titles

¹⁹⁰ In the quite popular book just quoted by Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, it is even written, as the third “commandment”, the following: “Labels should emphasize interpretation over instruction”, p. 2.

¹⁹¹ Dawn Hoskin, “Writing Labels & Gallery Text”, quot.

¹⁹² Nadja Sayej, “The art world tolerates abuse' - the fight to change museum wall labels”, in *The Guardian*, November 28, 2018, <https://bit.ly/39ZbG0>, accessed on January 20, 2021.

are widely accepted as original, authorial, and not problematic, almost as dogmas.

In almost all the totality of the untitled works analysed for the present research, no information was given on how and why the work of art was left untitled, the fact is simply ignored, which might puzzle the visitor even more. Is the work so transparent that it does not need a title? Was the title lost? Was it a choice of the artist of the results of various events? Why the artist left the work without title? Is the work not finished?

It is also fundamental to note that in depth research about titles should not be performed only by contemporary art curators, but scholars that deal with ancient and modern works of art: titles, as demonstrated, not always existed and their origin should be carefully studied, and consequently presented. In labels there is no trace of the possible diverse authorship of titles, or changes that might have occurred in the course of history. It is possible to identify two main reasons that explain why the titular dimension has not been investigated in depth, and if this happened, the results are often not presented: firstly, the entire dynamics surrounded titles have mostly been overlooked (not to mention the untitled title), even by art historians themselves, the lack of bibliography on the topic clearly indicates that; and secondly, the reduced space available: a very careful selection of information is offered to visitors in the restricted space of the label. It is, as a matter of fact, possible to note how succinct labels are, and the information needs therefore to be synthesized to the maximum, due to the fear of contributing to the increase of museum fatigue¹⁹³: visitors are constantly asked to read

¹⁹³ They know that most visitors spend ten seconds in front of an object—seven to read the label, three to examine the thing itself. They know that for most people museum fatigue sets in after about 45 minutes”, Gail Creg, ‘Your Labels Make Me Feel Stupid’, in *Artnews*, July 1, 2010, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/your-labels-make-me-feel-stupid-319/>, accessed on September 3rd, 2020.

panels, texts and contemporarily experience the works. Regarding the first point, it is also important to consider that the title has often been seen as a stable, definitive constituent of the work of art, while, as demonstrated, it is particularly problematic, and it can be subject to revision processes¹⁹⁴. Titles not always existed and why a work of art ended up having that name would require a very complex research. In all the scientific, structured, well thought guides about labels and label design, with the attention on detailed aspects, such as colours, fonts, sizes, not much attention is given to the research about titles.

In analysing the label is also useful to look, together with the title, to the work descriptions: these are sometimes included and sometimes excluded from the label, too often without a clear, stated, reason. Are just art historically relevant¹⁹⁵ artworks provided with work descriptions? Why some artworks in museum have extremely long texts, while others are simply presented with the basic information i.e., author, title, year and technique? Who is the author of the label?

The captions are, in the common imagination, a "place" of certainties, scientific instruments par excellence, precise and definitive. And their function? Who should take care of the captions? What to include, what to omit? How often to renew them? At what stage does the content, to be defined with the conservators and curators, become a matter of design, to be left

¹⁹⁴ The project, a call to action, by the artist Michelle Hartney, ambitiously titled "correcting art history" (2018 - ongoing), (as if there was only and one art history), aims to pose attention on the moral identity of authors, by writing a parallel label to the one existing. She performed her actions at the Metropolitan Museum, addressing the works of Picasso, Balthus and Gauguin.

¹⁹⁵ Also, this element would raise many issues, as for example who is deciding what is relevant and how often should labels be updated? Do they mirror the most advanced and accurate art historical research?

largely to those who design the graphic layout of the museum? And accessibility: should it be a prerequisite? To entrust, or perhaps to co-design? Should only the experts or also the visitors be involved? What sources, and who confirms their authority? And above all, how to define the correctness of the captions and evaluate their effectiveness?¹⁹⁶

Although this reflection is deeply concerned with all the information presented on labels, it actually can apply also to titles: they pose significant issues for what concerns their “origin”, as they went under various vicissitudes, nevertheless the public often looks at labels in order to find certainties. Labels rarely present themselves as the result of art historical research conducted by defined scholars (who are they? a uniform and coherent, permanent, undefined mass?), they should necessarily be subjected to a process of revision. How often should the labels be updated? Why are there no traces of the changes that affected the interpretation of a work of art?

Reflections on the role of the title should be situated in a climate of revision of the information about works of art in museums: “from the questioning of the concepts of high and low culture to the acceptance of multiple interpretations, up to the need of reconsidering the concepts of representation, authority and power”¹⁹⁷. Titles have a double valence, although they should be considered purely informative elements, they also have a nature of interpretative tools, as they provide insights and

¹⁹⁶ Maria Chiara Ciaccheri, Anna Chiara Cimoli and Nicole Moolhuijsen, *Senza Titolo. Le Metafore della Didascalia*, Nomos Edizioni, 2020, p. 9, my translation.

¹⁹⁷ Lisa C. Roberts, *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D. C. 1997, quoted after Maria Chiara Ciaccheri, Anna Chiara Cimoli and Nicole Moolhuijsen, *Senza Titolo*, quot., p. 19.

offer readings of the works of art. They definitely cannot be considered neutral elements. Recent discussions have affected titles, in particular in the 2014-2015 project of the Rijksmuseum titled “Adjustment of Colonial Terminology”: over two hundred works were renamed according to what at that moment was considered a politically correct wording¹⁹⁸. Titles will then be amended according to the social, political climate.

The untitled title poses particular problems for what concerns the experience of the spectator. According to Tina Roppola’s 2014 publication¹⁹⁹, the visitor always performs an evaluation of cost and benefits before reading the label, meaning that engaging with a particular activity (which is reading), is perceived as different from the actual experience of the work of art. It is possible to imagine that reading in the caption an untitled titled of a work of art might not be considered a positive, rewarding decision²⁰⁰, rather being a disappointing element²⁰¹.

¹⁹⁸ This operations poses many problems, as terminology can hardly be considered neutral and it is definitely subjected to cultural modifications. This operation modified titles which were considered (in 2014) not politically correct (examples 'negro' and 'Mohammedan', “dwarf”), despite the fact that of them were authorial. This operation can be seen as an anachronistic attempt of rewriting history, and eradicating the historical context. According to the official sources, the museum “would still keep the original terms used in the description of works on file in case of future reference”, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3358941/Dutch-gallery-fire-removing-offensive-terms-artworks-titles-descriptions-case-cause-offence.html>, accessed on November 14, 2020. This information will not be easily accessible and these labels will be, once more, deprived of the layers of history.

¹⁹⁹ Tiina Roppola, *Designing for the Museum Visitor Experience*, Routledge, New York, 2014.

²⁰⁰ According to an experiment titled “Untitled Effect: Effect of Type of Artwork Title on Audience Reaction”, conceived in 2016 by Ju-Yeon Park and Hyung-Deok Shin, untitled works can be memorized with greater efforts.

²⁰¹ “Visitors who aren’t familiar with contemporary art, there’s a feeling that they’re being tricked,” acknowledges Whitney Museum education director Kathryn Potts, in Gail Creg, ‘Your Labels Make Me Feel Stupid’, quot.

Indeed, in the case of non-figurative works, titles are considered the most direct tool for providing possible interpretation of what is there to be experienced: the untitled title would not be of any help. On the other side, the untitled title could be considered as a possible stimulus for the explosion of multiple interpretations and determine a work of art to be "open". The interpretation of a work of art is a very complex theme and cannot be reduced often to a unique and sole reading, which would be perhaps transmitted by a title.

Regarding the need of explanation to the public the artist Gabriel Orozco has written extremely clear words on the occasion of the realization of a fresco for the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1940, in conjunction with the summer exhibition of "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art". He reflected on the evolution of painting and how the public responded to it. Although he was openly critical towards the "reading" of a work of art, he eventually titled the work (which consisted of six interchangeable panels) and also released the following text, whose title is particularly funny:

OROZCO "EXPLAINS"

This "explanation" was written by Mr. Orozco. The quotation marks in his title indicate his feeling that explanations are unnecessary.

The public wants explanations about a painting. What the artist had in mind when he did it. What he was thinking of. What is the exact name of the picture, and what the artist means by that? If he is glorifying or cursing. If he believes in Democracy.

Going to the Italian Opera you get a booklet with a full account of why Rigoletto kills Aida at the end of a wild party with La Boheme, Lucia di Lammermoor and Madame Butterfly.

The Italian Renaissance is another marvellous opera full of killings and wild parties, and the public gets also thousands of booklets with complete and most detailed information about everything and

everybody in Florence and Rome. [...] They take for granted that every picture must be the illustration of a short story or of a thesis and want to be told the entertaining biography and bright sayings of the leaders in the stage-picture [...]. Suddenly, Madame Butterfly and her friend Rigoletto disappear from the stage-picture. Gone, too, are gloomy social conditions. To the amazement of the public the curtain goes up and nothing is on the stage but a few lines and cubes. The Abstract. The public protests and demands explanations, and explanations are given away freely and generously. Meanings? Names? Significance? Short stories? Well, let's invent them afterwards. The public refuses TO SEE painting. They want TO HEAR painting. They don't care for the show itself, they prefer TO LISTEN to the barker outside. Free lectures every hour for the blind, around the Museum. This way, please.²⁰²

On the press text, released for the occasion he wrote:

Orozco was asked if his selection of *The Dive Bomber* as his subject had any political significance. He said 'Of course not. I simply paint the life that is going on at present—what we are and what the world is at this moment. That is what modern art is, the actual feeling of life around us or the mood of whatever is just happening. As for political significance, that can be found in any painting if the observer wishes to see it there. Flowers could have a political significance, or a quiet home scene. As for the fresco I am now doing, no political significance is intended. Of course, a modern painting can mean one thing to one person and one thing to another. It is anything you like and is for the enjoyment and use of everybody. No one has to accept another person's meaning. Each can draw his own meaning out of a modern painting'.²⁰³

²⁰² Gabriel Orozco, *Orozco Explains*, 1940, MoMA (Journal), without number.

²⁰³ Press Release, Gabriel Orozco, MoMA, June 17, 1940.

The more and more contemporary consistent use of the Untitled as title can be situated in the reflections posed by Mr. Orozco, as authors seem to be interested, more and more, in the freedom of experience of their works of art, as mentioned in the previous chapters.

The apparent “unreadability”, unclarity of abstract works and the lack of information from the side of the artist (through the common title Untitled) has sometimes caused quite strong reactions in the public, in the history of criticism and art experience. In the renowned article “The Public Be Damned”²⁰⁴ Huntington Hartford heavily criticized the freedom left to the spectator: “‘What does it mean to you?’ To each individual the painting means something different. [...] What can you possibly answer to such nonsense?”²⁰⁵. The Untitled title, in fact, allowed the critics, as well as the public, to express their perception: “Having cleared the deck of all legitimate standards of art, the critics are quite free to make their own standards and establish their own little dictatorship”²⁰⁶. According to Hartford the “abstraction”²⁰⁷ of some works and the lack of indicators, although he did not refer directly to the lack of a title, cannot be an excuse for not fulfilling the artist’s main duty: “the fact that he must communicate with his audience, and that a world which is reasonably recognizable to the public must be the basis of all his work”²⁰⁸. The untitled title, at a first sight, does not facilitate the communicative power of artworks: it does not offer any hints for the interpretation of a work of art, but potentially, in its silent dimension, it

²⁰⁴ Huntington Hartford, “The Public Be Damned”, in *The American Mercury*, March 1955, pp. 35-42.

²⁰⁵ *Ivi*, p. 37.

²⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁰⁷ *Ivi*, p. 36.

²⁰⁸ *Ivi*, p. 41.

does not exclude any. How can the untitled title “explain, guide, pose questions, inform and provoke”²⁰⁹? This has proven to be problematic in the experience of abstract works of art, as in the reviews of some Abstract Expressionist works and exhibitions. Does the untitled title really push the spectator to develop personal reflection, as to satisfy her or his desire to know? Does the untitled title feed a confrontation among the visitors or it does it shut down any possible reading? Does it invite for a silent, non-verbal contemplation of the works of art?

As the title is believed to be the product of the author, but often, as demonstrated, it is not, how can the experience of a work of art be considered authentic²¹⁰? Where are the various filters situated and why they are not declared to the visitors?

²⁰⁹ Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels*: quot., p. 19.

²¹⁰ The issue has been analysed in chapter 1.

2. The Untitled title in Abstract Expressionism: variants and reception of the term

Although the roots of the Untitled as a title can be found, as analysed in chapter one also before 1940s, it is in this decade that the term found a major diffusion and artists reflected consistently on the lack of title, as well as developed different strategies to title works of art without referential words. The chapter's structure is constructed as follows: it is introduced by an overview on the art movement with the criticalities of its own definition, focusing also on the name Abstract Expressionism; then an overview of the artists reactions towards titles is present. This selection does not aim to be exhaustive or fully represent all of the artists included in the movement, rather it aims to show how different were the motivations in the use of the Untitled as title. It is crucial to analyse chronologically the exhibition history to show how innovation was fostered, leading most of the artists to use alternative ways of titling and the title Untitled by the mid 1950s. A detailed analysis will be devoted to four main figures, due to their artistic awareness in relation to the process of titling and the availability of related sources: Clyfford Still (1904 - 1980), Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970), Jackson Pollock (1912 - 1956); while a brief analysis will be devoted to Willem de Kooning.

As an appendix to the thesis, an early discussion among different artists and curators, regarding the power of titles and the lack of a title is presented. It is an extremely precious source as it shows how the points of view were different.

2.1. Abstract Expressionism: complexities of the term

It is not possible to record a uniformity in the strategies of titling in Abstract Expressionism, the artists often reunited in exhibitions and affiliated with the group as “The New York School”, (among them Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, David Smith and Clyfford Still) made extremely different choices and attributed different powers to the title. They even sometimes expressed a strong resistance towards the umbrella Abstract Expressionism and various scholars have noted that “Abstract Expressionists were strongly individualistic”²¹¹, being not fully coherent as a movement and differentiating in a considerable way their practice in time²¹². In the exhibition catalogue of Jackson Pollock at MOMA, following his death, Sam Hunter wrote about the artists as a “heterogeneous group who have been linked in an informal movement sometimes called Abstract Expressionism”²¹³.

²¹¹ Clifford Ross, *Abstract expressionism: creators and critics*, H.N. Abrams, New York, 1990, p. 10.

²¹² In many texts, regarding the cohesiveness their differences have been highlighted, even by the same protagonists: “Such men as Rothko, Pollock, Tomlin, Hofman, Motherwell, Bazioties, David Smith, Arp, etc. have been grouped together in shows but are completely dissimilar in attitudes. Although a few of these are loyal friends of one another, they will not hesitate to argue a technical point all night in an effort to reach an understanding. They are often diametrically opposed. Those who have labelled a “drip school” where paint is flung at a canvas with no consideration of results, will be vastly disappointed”. From “An Interview with Clyfford Still”, in *The League*, 12, 2, Fall 1951, pp. 5-6.

²¹³ Sam Hunter, *Jackson Pollock*, exh. cat., New York, MoMA, 1956, introduction.

The term Abstract Expressionism, coined by Robert Coates in 1946, was used the first time to describe works by Hans Hoffman²¹⁴ and was then adopted, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, to reunite the work of several artists in exhibitions in the USA and Europe²¹⁵: it became then an art historical reference for a period being rarely questioned nowadays.

As mentioned, artists affiliated with the group showed a certain resistance towards categorization and their collective naming: “classification is extraneous to art. Most labels attached to painting are unenlightening. Talent is the thing. ‘Isms’ are literature”²¹⁶. Willem de Kooning on this behalf also added: “it is disastrous to name ourselves”²¹⁷. The cohesiveness of the group has been at the centre of various discussions even among the artists, as Still has for example written: “we

²¹⁴ The exhibition was held at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery: “due to his style, for he is certainly one of the most uncompromising representatives of what some people call the spatter-and-daub school of painting and I, more politely, have christened abstract Expressionism. There's no doubt that his painting is ‘difficult,’ and there are four or five of the eighteen canvases in the show in which the emphasis on accidental effects (that is, spatters and daubs) is so strong that I'd be willing to dismiss them as sheer nonsense if in some of the others he didn't display a combination of subtlety and power which argues an over-all intention too well developed to be brushed aside so lightly. I must say, though, that I much prefer his more calculated designs, such as ‘Phosphoric Form’, ‘Moloch II’, and the massively organized ‘Taurus.’ There's a big one called ‘Resurrection’, a pure tour de force of mounting blues and reds and yellows, that is also worth noting, for it shows how thoroughly he understands the emotional connotations of color; and there’s another, “Entombement,” which, though done in pure black and white, is remarkable for the suggestions it carries - amorphous, yet still somehow evident - or the classic graveyard scene: moonlight, Doric pillars, marble portico, and all” in Robert Coates, “The Art Galleries” in *The New Yorker*, 1946, March, p. 84.

²¹⁵ Harold Rosenberg used the term “American Action Painters” as a title in *Art News*, Vol. 51, December 1952.

²¹⁶ Howard Putzel, “A Problem for Critics” in Edward Alden Jewell, “Towards Abstract or Away”, in *The New York Times*, July 1, 1945; republished in Ellen G. Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism. Context and Critique*, Yale University, 2005.

²¹⁷ Excerpts from Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35” in Robert Goodnough, *Modern Artists in America*, Wittenborn Schultz, 1951, p. 344.

were all quite different. There was no cabal, no gang, no real movement, although we shared certain basic attitudes, a basic vocabulary”²¹⁸. David Sylvester, in a brilliant conversation with Adolph Gottlieb, stated:

David Sylvester: “One of the things that puzzles me about the New York School of painting is that it isn’t exactly a movement [...] you can’t mistake a Pollock for a Rothko [...].

Adolph Gottlieb: “[...] at no point was there ever any sort of a doctrine or a programme or anything that would make a School – a conscious common denominator that made all the paintings have a relationship. [...] they were trying to break away from certain things. There were also certain destructive impulses. [...] We revolted in a way against everything, all of the standards; we didn’t accept any standards.”²¹⁹

The Untitled as a title, its frequent use, can also be situated in the framework of “revolt” Gottlieb is referring to.

Even when these artists were presented abroad the term Abstract Expressionism was questioned: “these artists dislike labels and shun the words 'movement' and 'school'”²²⁰. Their common appreciation for independence from definitions was well noted: “we are dealing with a kind of painting that seems to refuse any frame, any imprisonment, which no longer takes anything into consideration”²²¹. Of course, various

²¹⁸ Thomas Albright, "A Conversation with Clyfford Still", in *Artnews*, 75, March 1976, pp. 30-35.

²¹⁹ David Sylvester, “Adolph Gottlieb”, recorded in March 1960 in New York, printed in David Sylvester, *Interviews with American artists*, Yale University Press, 2001, no page number.

²²⁰ Alfred H. Barr, Introduction to *The new American Painting, as shown in eight European countries, 1958-1959*, organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1959, p. 16.

²²¹ Andre Chastel, untitled, in *Le Monde*, Paris, January 17, 1959, mentioned in *The new*

elements were in common, as the physical relationship with the canvas, the lack of recognizable figurative content and the transmission of very personal, intimate emotions. Their unity was evident in the case of opposition to something, as for example on the occasion of protests against a “shared enemy”²²².

The innovative aspects they strived for concerned all the dimensions of the artwork, as for example “the quality of adventure, of individual striving, of hammering out modes of expression with a pioneering sense of independence, lends these personal utterances a forceful, easily communicable, vitality”²²³.

Some resistance towards direct communication or clarity in expression was also well noted:

In short these painters, as a matter of principle, do nothing deliberately in their work to make 'communication' easy. Yet in spite of their intransigence, their following increases, largely because the paintings themselves have a sensuous, emotional, aesthetic and at

American Painting, as shown in eight European countries, quot., p. 12.

²²² As recorded by H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.A. Bois and B.H.D. Buchloch, the protest was against the 1950 exhibition organized by the Metropolitan in New York, titled *American Painting Today*. The organizers, according to the group, were “notoriously hostile to advanced art”, noting that “only advanced art has made any consequential contribution to civilization”. Letter dated May 20th, 1950 and signed by Jimmy Ernst, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, William Baziotes, Hans Hofmann, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Richard Poussette-Dart, Theodoros Stamos, Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Willem de Kooning, Hedda Sterne, James Brooks, Weldon Kees, Fritz Bultman and the sculptors Herbert Ferber, David Smith, Ibram Lassaw, Mary Callery, Day Schnabel, Seymour Lipton, Peter Grippe, Theodore Roszak, David Hare and Louise Bourgeois, from H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.A. Bois and B.H.D. Buchloch, *Art Since 1900, Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Thames and Hudson, 2004, p. 348. Soon after the renowned photograph by Nina Leen, titled “The Inscrutable”, was published in *Life Magazine* in January 1951.

²²³ Unknown author, “The New American Painting: Fine Tate Exhibition”, in *Times*, 24 February 1959, February 4, 1959.

times almost mystical power, which works and can be overwhelming.²²⁴

Clyfford Still's desire not to be associated with Abstract Expressionism was not respected: he was often included in exhibitions of this group, although his works "transcend the label of Abstract Expressionism and become epochal, timeless statements of man in raw, basic confrontation with himself"²²⁵. His position, as it will be presented, would reach an unprecedented scenario for what concerns the choice of titles, especially in the mid of the 1940s.

Although a few scholars have speculated over the reasons of the title Untitled or about the titling practice, the direct reflections of the artists constitute an essential source on which the present study is based.

The artistic awareness of artists such as Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970), Barnett Newman (1905 - 1970), Clyfford Still (1904-1980), Jackson Pollock (1912 - 1956), Ad Reinhardt (1913 - 1967), have proved to be fundamental in theorizing about the Untitled title. Their literary inclination has generated an extraordinary multiplicity of sources: they commented, discussed and wrote about the use of titles in interviews, letters, or in their declarations. Even among their contemporaries, Rothko's and Newman's knowledgeability was noted:

He [Rothko] was very articulate. He spoke slowly and would give anything he said a great deal of thought and spoke in well-rounded sentences. And he formulated his ideas. Willem de Kooning or Arshile Gorky or Franz Kline would leave whole areas that they didn't feel it was necessary to pin down in words. But Rothko felt –

²²⁴ Alfred H. Barr, *The new American Painting*, quot., p. 17.

²²⁵ Jacquin Sanders, "One Man Against the World", in *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, February 8, 1970.

and Barney Newman felt – that it was necessary to pin things down in words.²²⁶

The use of non-traditional titles was highlighted in different reviews in the 1940s and 1950s, as for example by Maude Riley:

Two presently controversial figures are the fairly young Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko whose titles are numbers, rather than suggestive word. Their extraordinary canvases appear revolutionary even in this company; and it is possible that these men are showing the way to new horizon.²²⁷

Although with different timing, strategies and reasons, it is possible to observe that Pollock, Still and Rothko moved away from Surrealism and they “purged the style of mystification and literary content”²²⁸. This was their first step towards the progressive liberation of the artwork from external suggestions or evoked influences. It is important to note that the presence of less recognizable forms played an important role in the progressive liberation from the title, as it happened with Abstract art at the beginning of the century. The Untitled title, however, is not simply the result of the progressive abstraction of the images, as Alfred Barr clearly stated:

As a consequence, rather than by intent, most of the paintings seem

²²⁶ Oral history interview with Elaine de Kooning, 1981 August 27, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Archives of American Art will be referred to as AAA, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-elaine-de-kooning-11999>, accessed on October 10, 2020.

²²⁷ Maude Riley, “35 American Painters of Today”, in *Bulletin of the Associates in Fine Arts at Yale University*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 35, February, 1950.

²²⁸ Sam Hunter, *Jackson Pollock*, quot., introduction.

abstract. Yet they are never formalistic or non-objective in spirit. Nor is there (in theory) any preoccupation with the traditional aesthetics of 'plastic values', composition, quality of line, beauty of surface, harmony of colour. When these occur in the paintings - and they often do - it is the result of a struggle for order almost as intuitive as the initial chaos with which the paintings begin. Despite the high degree of abstraction, the painters insist that they are deeply involved with subject matter or content. The content, however, is never explicit or obvious even when recognizable forms emerge, as in certain paintings by de Kooning, Baziotes, and Gottlieb. Rarely do any conscious associations explain the emotions of fear, gaiety, anger, violence, or tranquillity which these paintings transmit or suggest.²²⁹

As well noted, the use of the title Untitled has been determined by a specific environment and defined climate: "this sentiment of freedom and possibility, accompanied by a new faith in the self-sufficiency of forms and colors, became deeply rooted within our culture in the last fifty years"²³⁰. Shapiro looked specifically at painting that "by becoming abstract and giving up its representational function, has achieved a state in which communication seems to be deliberately prevented"²³¹: images were somehow silenced:

The experience of the work of art, like the creation of the work of art itself, is a process ultimately opposed to communication as it is understood now. What has appeared as noise in the first encounter becomes in the end message or necessity, though never message in a

²²⁹ Alfred Barr, *The New American Painting*, MoMa, Press Release, 1959, p. 3.

²³⁰ Meyer Schapiro, "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art", in *Art News*, Summer 1957, no page number.

²³¹ *Ibidem*.

perfectly reproducible sense. You cannot translate it into words or make a copy of it which will be quite the same thing.²³²

²³² *Ibidem.*

2.2. Clyfford Still (1904 - 1980)

Titles in Still's oeuvre represent a rather complex issue, in fact it is possible to document the presence of referential-metaphorical titles, precise dates, numbers, codes, and also the title Untitled. It is therefore fundamental to reconstruct chronologically his exhibition history in order to document his progressive abandonment of titles. Clyfford Still's works, together with his own persona and his controversial attitude towards the public, generated the growth of a debate regarding the freedom of experiencing an artwork.

Clyfford Still, as Katherine Kuh has written, "was among the first [...] to realize that a painting need not to depict, suggest, or symbolize anything. For him it exists as a totality in its own right"²³³. This statement clearly sets the grounds for the comprehension of Still's attitude and thought in general regarding art and the experience of it. The artist has always been concerned about the integrity and self-sustainability of his paintings: "freedom is Clyfford Still's password"²³⁴. Paintings "remain nameless, as they should. They are not about life; they lead their own lives"²³⁵. His praise for the freedom of interpretation became even ironic during a conversation, denouncing the growing importance of art critics, such as Clement Greenberg, in that period:

People should look at the work itself and determine its meaning to them [...] I prefer the innocent reaction of those who might think they

²³³ Katharine Kuh, "Clyfford Still", in *Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, edited by John P. O'Neill, Harry N. Abrams, 1979, pp. 9-13.

²³⁴ Katharine Kuh, "Clyfford Still, the Enigma", in *Vogue*, February 1, 1970, p. 218.

²³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 219.

see cloud shapes in my paintings to what Clement Greenberg says that he sees in them.²³⁶

His statement: “My works are, for the observer, what he sees or feels in them”²³⁷ defines the openness that characterized them, adding that “each picture is complete. Is a complete unit [...] Each picture is self-sufficient”²³⁸. All these reflections pushed for a more, and unprecedented, democratic attitude in art history, against the power of interpretation of art critics: there was no need for translation, explanation or contextualization of a piece of art, as it could speak by itself, in a kind of Lutheran artistic reform.

The aversion of Still to explanatory words is clearly visible in his writings:

I deplore most the overemphasis on words. Not the poet's words, but words that explain, reason, debate, deduce, make 'fact'... Verbiage becomes a substitute for comprehension. And everything Leads to words and words become a substitute for everything. From the state of the weather to an interpretation of the picture, words bear the burden of our stuttering life.

A substitute for thinking, a substitute for seeing, a substitute even for Listening and smelling and copulating, words do a remarkable job of miscreating and aborting experience and understanding [...] simulate

²³⁶ Thomas Albright "A Conversation with Clyfford Still", in *Artnews* 75, March 1976, pp. 30-35.

²³⁷ *Ibidem*.

²³⁸ Clyfford Still diary, December 29, 1973, quoted from Clyfford Still Museum, retrieved online at: <https://clyffordstillmuseum.org/object/diary-notes-from-dec-29-1973/>, accessed on October 10, 2020.

the very alpha and omega of understanding.²³⁹

Still clearly wanted to reach a directness in his works by “cutting through all cultural opiates, past and present, so that a direct, immediate, and truly free vision could be achieved, and an idea be revealed with clarity”²⁴⁰.

The idea of correlation of a picture with words or other information was totally contrasted by Still: “The pictures are to be without titles of any kind. I want no allusions to interfere with or assist the spectator”²⁴¹. He also added: “I consider it absurd to add another link to the chain”²⁴². His works needed purity from words: “Thus would the works by my hand called paintings remain unencumbered by verbal associations”²⁴³. These statements translate in a call for freedom of experience, he never explicitly affirmed what his work was or was not about.

The communicative power of artworks was not at the core of his interest:

Edgar Berman: ‘Are you concerned about communication, whether you reach all the people?’

Clyfford Still: ‘Not in the least. That is what the comic strip does’.

Edgar Berman: ‘Then you paint for yourself.’

²³⁹ Clyfford Still, diary notes of Fall 1945, quoted in “Clyfford Still: Biography,” compiled by Patricia Still, in Thomas Kellein, *Clyfford Still, 1904-1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, Prestel, 1992, p. 151.

²⁴⁰ Clyfford Still, *Paintings by Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, 1959.

²⁴¹ Clyfford Still, *Letter to Betty Parsons*, dated December 29, 1949, AAA, Betty Parsons Papers.

²⁴² *Ibidem*.

²⁴³ Clyfford Still in *Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., edited by John Philip O’Neill, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979, p. 19.

Clyfford Still: 'Yes'.²⁴⁴

Clyfford Still's desire not to associate his works to any particular meaning was noted by Katherine Kuh: in her introduction to his show in 1966 at the Albright Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, she mirrored the same artist's difficulties in finding adequate words for his paintings: "when I try to put my thoughts into words I stumble [...] since Still deals with intangibles and imponderables, any evaluation of his paintings becomes doubly tenuous"²⁴⁵.

In her introduction for Still's show at the Metropolitan in 1979, she again highlighted the inconvertible ineffable aspect of his work: "his untitled canvases seem more related to the inter-weavings of orchestral music than to explicit visual experiences"²⁴⁶. The difficulty in verbalization was rendered more powerful by the lack of Still's own readings or any suggestions for interpretation.

The choice of non-referential titles is due not only to the desire of not influencing the spectator but can be situated in a larger schema. Indeed, the ambition of his work is to "restore to man the freedom lost in 20 centuries of apology and devices for subjugation" as he wanted to "create a free place or area of life where an idea can transcend politics, ambition and commerce"²⁴⁷.

The self-sufficiency of the works has been described as a self-integrity and as a self-identification with them, where nothing else is

²⁴⁴ Still in conversation with Edgar Berman, January 1958, in *Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., 1979, quot., p. 41.

²⁴⁵ Katharine Kuh, "Foreword", in *Clyfford Still-Thirty-three Paintings in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery*, Buffalo, 1966.

²⁴⁶ Katharine Kuh, "Clyfford Still", in *Clyfford Still*, edited by John P. O'Neill, quot., pp. 9-13.

²⁴⁷ Clyfford Still, "An Open Letter to an Art Critic", in *Artforum*, December 1963, Vol. 2, No. 6. p. 32.

needed: "there I function and there alone would I be understood"²⁴⁸. His sentences seem to recall also Ad Reinhardt ideals of *Art as Art* that will be discussed in the next subchapter. Clyfford Still completely contemned allusions or descriptions of the "content" of the work of art: "I have no brief for signs or symbols or literary allusions in painting. They are just crutches for illustrators and politicians desperate for an audience"²⁴⁹. His work, described by Thomas Albright, never allowed for an interpretation: "Still has by no means mellowed in his life-long battle against the deadening forces of the Art Establishment – including even sympathetic critics who would attempt to 'interpret' or explain away his work"²⁵⁰.

His desire of not conveying a unique definition forced the reviewer to rather state what the paintings are not: "that are in no way concerned with the multiple viewing of something and are no form of constructed geometry, and yet which are not decorations or decorative objects"²⁵¹.

Clyfford Still was well aware of the high impact of his production:

I set myself the task of taking painting out of academicism and all the collective traps laid down for it by the need for security in the name of rationalism, culture, aesthetics and other conventional alibis. Inevitably I had to violate the expectations or demands of others in painting. It was done consciously and with high purpose. And the results? - I fought for freedom to build an unlimited and ennobling instrument.²⁵²

²⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁴⁹ Still quoted in Grace Sharpless, *Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, 1963, p. 6.

²⁵⁰ Thomas Albright, "Having Lunch With a Legend", in *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 8, 1976, p. 38.

²⁵¹ Christopher Andreae, untitled, in *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 2, 1970, p. 8.

²⁵² Clyfford Still, *Letter to Clement Greenberg*, 12 April 1955, in Clement Greenberg papers, AAA.

In a letter to Clement Greenberg, he expressed an extremely harsh criticism towards gallery owners, who, as it will be presented, forced him to adopt titles:

I trust you will forgive me for not calling you again about the French & Company gallery. I am not interested in having any gallery or dealers handle my work. In the past, they accomplished only almost irreparable harm to both myself and my work by their stupidity, their personal ambition, and avarice. I have no desire to repeat the experience. My temper is not as resilient as it was a dozen years ago.²⁵³

In a conversation following his retrospective of 1959 at the Albright Knox Gallery, Benjamin Townsend clarified the role of titles in Still's works. After denying that the landscape has had any influence on Still's work, the author wrote:

he does not give his works titles, as he would if they were about something outside himself or his response to something external, but designates them by the year in which they are painted and a letter to indicate their order in annual sequence. These, he repeated, are like the dates that head entries in a journal and as such have significance chiefly for him. Mindful of the insistence and ingenuity with which critics hunt down natural images in his abstract works dating from the mid-forties, I questioned him further. Did he not see in these works, as others did, the presence of fire, mountains, clouds, sky-scapes tipped on end, stalactites and stalagmites, veins of metal, or the grain and bark of wood?

²⁵³ Clyfford Still, *Letter to Clement Greenberg*, 28 November 1958, in Clement Greenberg Papers, AAA

To indicate the kind of nonsense that passes itself off as communication and his contempt for it, Still quoted Hamlet's mocking rejoinder to Polonius.²⁵⁴

Clyfford Still's has often been at the centre of criticism as viewers usually tend to:

rather surround art with interpretation, analysis and a host of other elaborations which have become part of a gigantic verbal superstructure designed to make art more comfortable—and profitable. Within the framework of this superstructure, Clyfford Still's painting ' ' has been generally misunderstood and his attitude has been considered arrogant. Still's resolute refusal to "explain" his work, for example, has frequently been interpreted as uncommunicativeness, although it could be argued that no other artist in recent times has been more concerned about communication.²⁵⁵

As David Anfam wrote, it is from the show at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in 1959, that Still made a huge rupture with his past:

The year 1959 was the occasion of a massive retrospective of seventy-two paintings at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery [...] It also marked the inception of a more elaborate accompanying statement than those included in previous catalogues and, most importantly, saw the emergence of the impressive (if confusing) code-system of titling pictures. Before then they were identified, when lacking traditional

²⁵⁴ Benjamin Townsend, "An Interview with Clyfford Still", in *Audit*, Winter/Spring 1961, pp. 45-48. The passage of the dialogue quoted by Still is hilarious: Polonius agrees to each of Plato's suggestions regarding the items that a cloud resembles, suggesting how open-ended works can be, of course Still is ironic.

²⁵⁵ Thomas Albright, "A Conversation with Clyfford Still", quot., pp. 30-35.

titles, by the anonymous designation of “Painting” or “Untitled”. A combination of dates, alphabet letters and numerals would subsequently weld the oeuvre exposed to outside view into a conspicuously arranged network. An interim number, derived from a private photographic index, signified in other cases the forthcoming inclusion of a painting within the presumably vast magnum opus of a lifetime.²⁵⁶

The aim of this sophisticated code-titling system was to remove any possible categorization and defined interpretation of his works of art, they were in use for the unique purpose of identifying them unequivocally. The generic term untitled could, as a matter of fact, create a huge confusion in his *oeuvre*, as well as in the paths of other artists.

Looking at Still’s exhibition history can definitely shed more light on the evolution of his titling practice, although, as David Anfam has noted, “until a Still catalogue raisonné exists, the exact chronology of the 1930s and earlier 1940s remains unresolved”²⁵⁷. There have been many attempts, most of them led by Anfam’s exquisite expertise, to reconstruct exactly the chronology of his first exhibitions, but some issues are still open.

In the 1920s and 1930s Still was titling works, as in the case of *The Snow Plow*, 1930; *Moving*, 1935; *Row of Grain Elevators*, 1936; *A funeral, North Dakota*, 1937: these titles demonstrate a quite significant use of words, they, as a matter of fact, describe or provide a context, such as in the case of *North Dakota*.

Clyfford Still had his first one-man exhibition at the San

²⁵⁶ David Anfam, *Clyfford Still*, Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD, University of London at the Courtauld Institute of Art, 1984, p. 20.

²⁵⁷ David Anfam, “Clyfford Still’s Art: Between the Quick and the Dead”, in *Clyfford Still: Paintings, 1944-1960*, ed. James T. Demetron, Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 16 - 46.

Francisco Museum of Art in March 1943, where he showed titled works, as *The White Plow, The Yellow Plow, The White Hand, Man with a Sheaf, Man with an Orange Lily* and *Green Wheat*²⁵⁸.

At Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century (Clyfford Still, "First exhibition paintings", 12 February - 2 March, extended to 7 March 1946), according to the exhibition brochure, that includes a preface of Mark Rothko²⁵⁹, he exhibited fourteen titled works of art: *The Comedy of Tragic Deformation; Buried Sun, Siamese Cat and Daughters; Quicksilver; Jamais; The Grass Widow; The Apostate; Self-Portrait; Theopatic Entities; Nemesis of Esther III; Biomorphic Mechanism; Elegy; Premonition; The Spectre and the Perroquet*. These titles could add substance to Rothko's informative text as they are highly suggestive:

²⁵⁸ According to the handwritten accession record for the exhibition "Paintings by Clyfford Still", San Francisco Museum of Art, California, March 2-21, 1943, Courtesy Clyfford Still Archives, the works of art exhibited displayed were the following (titles are Still's titles and the number and added inventory numbers by the Clyfford Still Museum): "The Green Wing / 2 722 Figure in Black + White / 3, 723 Two heads / 4 724 Premonition / 5 725 Forms in Blue 7 / 6 726 Green Wheat / 7 727 Figure on Blue Denim 23 / 8 728 Yellow Pelvis 17 / 9 729 Forms with Yellow Line / 10 730 Form with Green Head 15 / 11 731 Figure in Line / 12 732 Man with Sheaf 6 - PH-209 / 13 733 Figures in Red + Black / 14 734 The Yellow Plow 8 PH-934 / 15 735 The White Place / 16 736 The White Hand 9 PH-932 / 17 737 Figures in Red + Black / 18 739 Night / 19 740 Forms 19? / 20 741 Man with Orange Lily 25 / 21 742 Form in White 12 / 22 743 The Yellow Elevator / 23 744 Prairie Winter 2 / 24 745 Freight Leaving Town 1 / 25 746 The Snow Plow 3 / 26 747 Mrs. Earle Blew / 27 748 Mr. Hargroves / 28 749 Miss Garske / 29 750 The Sculptor, Mr. Pritchard 18 / 30 751 Wife of the Artist / 31 752 Self-Portrait.

²⁵⁹ Still would then be disappointed by this preface, declaring his distance from groups, consider Still's diary extract reported in the following pages and the lines in his biography compiled by the wife saying: "Appropriation by 'Myth-makers' group in New York at this time led to misinterpretation of meaning and intent of the painting. [...] Later attempts to incorporate him into a 'Ochool of New York' were publicly protested by him as totally falsifying his relation to his work and to other artists", from exh. cat. "Paintings by Clyfford Still", Albright Art Gallery, quot., 1959, preface.

It is significant that Still, working out West, and alone, has arrived at pictorial conclusions so allied to those of the small band of Myth Makers who have emerged here during the war. The fact that his is a completely new facet of this idea, using unprecedented forms and completely personal methods, attests further to the vitality of this movement.²⁶⁰

According to the information provided by Still, who with his second wife and daughter reconstructed and documented retrospectively all his shows, these titles were not his. The exhibition actually featured twelve paintings, as well as a portfolio of twenty-three works oil on paper “while Guggenheim purportedly assigned mythological titles to each artwork at the suggestion of Surrealist André Breton”²⁶¹. In Still’s diary it is possible to note quite an accurate description of the unfolding of the events, which is quite significant to report, as it offers a precious image of the dynamics that informed the exhibition, and led us to have today those titles today.

Miss Guggenheim introduced me to Andre Breton in her gallery one day near Thanksgiving. He refused to speak English but expressed interest in this black canvas. After some verbal exchange in French with him, Peggy said that he would like to come down and see more of my paintings. [...] A date was set and he came one evening about nine-thirty with Peggy. He indicated that he felt at a loss when he discovered that I had no titles on my pictures to give him a key to their meanings. My remarks which Peggy interpreted to him were but an addition to the confusion. I was not of the surrealist persuasion in

²⁶⁰ Mark Rothko, "Introduction", in *First Exhibition, Paintings: Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., 1946, quot., Courtesy Clyfford Still Archives.

²⁶¹ Notes in the LUNA Project related to the typed catalog of artworks exhibited in *First Exhibition, Paintings: Clyfford Still*, Art of This Century Gallery, New York, February 12-March 7, 1946. Courtesy Clyfford Still Archives.

either its theory or practice, especially in its dialectical apologia and its political correlatives. However, Breton generously emphasized to Miss Guggenheim the importance of her owning at least one of the works. [...] The paintings chosen were from those executed between 1940 and 1945. Thus I hoped to make clear to a small degree the evolution and invention basic to the purpose in my work as it moved toward clarification and intensification. Inasmuch as I had not titled my works for many years to avoid introducing irrelevant associations or implications of illustration, the problem of identification was disposed of by titles invented by Miss Guggenheim and her staff. Rothko's explanation for Miss Guggenheim's inviting me to show in her gallery was that she needed good men and that mine would be the only worthwhile show of the season for her unless, improbably, Jackson Pollock were to pull something unexpected out of the bag. As Mark had shown extreme interest in the work and urged Miss Guggenheim to see it, I gave him permission to write the foreword for the leaflet introducing the show. To Miss Guggenheim's consternation he used the opportunity to relate my work to his interest in a dialectical terminology centering on the concept of "myth"—a popular application to lend authority to the experimental exercises he and a few others were making at that time. Miss Guggenheim questioned my willingness to let my work be written about in this historical-literary relationship. I agreed with her but chose to let the foreword stand as simply Rothko's personal way of expressing himself. I was naïvely indifferent to such tactics at that time. I had no intention of joining any group or cult or gallery, so taking sides did not occur to me. In succeeding months, I protested to Rothko about this device so effectively, in fact, that he later dropped it in relation to his own work as misleading and irrelevant.

In my notes at the time I wrote:

I await the opening of the show with a strange mixture of anticipation and hope and cynicism. I have taken the precaution to prepare myself for flight back to western Canada. The atmosphere here is too seriously commercial to escape its vitiating pressure and its attendant subordination of the freedom of the creative spirit. It is frequently remarked that all the successful artists look like business-men: The fact is, they are shrewd, politically sensitive, and tough business-men who dabble in painting. Of good intelligence and fair insight, a spark of creative revolt can scarcely be found in the entire lot. They are merely competent people equally at home and able in any field they might enter. But they all know who they are painting for and why, and it is not for the edification of mind or soul.²⁶²

The commercial aspect holds major importance and Still is forced to accept these titles²⁶³. The growing pressure of galleries might be the issue he seemed to refer to in the letter directed to Clement Greenberg, quoted above. In his catalogue of the retrospective at the Albright Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, in 1959, already mentioned, a biography compiled by Patricia Still, the second wife of Still, is included. This officially stated that "all titles associated with work were applied by gallery for their personal interest"²⁶⁴. The "personal interest" mentioned, probably, can stand for a commercial interest: it is likely that it was a way easier for a dealer to refer directly to a painting by its name, also in order to construct a history and mythology around the painting itself, as a way to make it

²⁶² Clyfford Still's diary, published in John Philip O'Neill, *Clyfford Still*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, quot., p. 24.

²⁶³ Angelica Zander Rudenstine discusses the origins of Still's titles in *Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice*, Harry N. Abrams, 1985, pp. 707-9.

²⁶⁴ Patricia Garske Still, Clyfford Still's biography in Still, *Paintings by Clyfford Still*, Albright Art Gallery, quot., p. 11-12.

more marketable (“too seriously commercial”²⁶⁵). In a private conversation Patricia Still confirmed the rage of Still for the actions of Peggy Guggenheim:

He riled from day one...a dealer, a museum curator asking for titles. Fishing for a clue. But absolutely, when Peggy Guggenheim insisted on titles. In spite of Still’s insistence ‘no titles’, she went ahead and titled them. From then on, any titles to a painting were not Still’s choice. And he was furious.²⁶⁶

Although there are some exceptions, these titles, highly suggestive, were permanently removed between 1959 and the early 1970s, therefore it is rather complicated to associate these titles with the works²⁶⁷. Still was very precise in deleting any traces of the titles and all the documentation available today, in the LUNA project of the Clyfford Still Museum, does not allow re-association of a title to a certain work with full accuracy:

The task of ordering these titles and cataloguing the many paintings involved (at first recorded in hand-painted replicas, later photographs, by Still’s wife and daughter) was probably begun in earnest in the seven years or so before the Buffalo retrospective. Insofar as he felt such a process was necessary, it could suggest that Still had started to envisage his career in monumentalized terms.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ Clyfford Still diary, published in John Philip O’Neill, *Clyfford Still*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, quot.,

²⁶⁶ Patricia Still in an e-mail to me through the precious mediation of David Anfam, 26th January 2019.

²⁶⁷ David Anfam reconstructed the exhibition including the titles in “Of the Earth, the Damned, and of the Recreated’: Aspects of Clyfford Still’s Earlier Work” in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 135, No. 1081, April 1993, pp. 260 - 269.

²⁶⁸ David Anfam, *Clyfford Still*, PhD Thesis, quot., p. 21

The work now titled PH-233 still carries the formerly title *Self-Portrait*, as does *PH-314*, that still carry as additional title *The Spectre and the Perroquet*, it is not possible to know why these titles were not erased. Guggenheim purchased PH-739, which is still known as *Jamais* and is currently on view, with this title, at the The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. Apart from these works all the others are known now only by the reference number²⁶⁹.

The will of Still was very clear: as mentioned in the introductory part, he was very critical of “context-creating allusions or associations [as] they would mislead the viewer and limit the work’s meaning and implications. Still does not want to assist the spectator with allusions”²⁷⁰, therefore the works exhibited and listed in the brochure are now known with these codes as titles: *PH-351* of 1940; *PH-298*, of 1942; *PH-197*, of 1944; *PH-739*, of 1944; *PH-159*, of 1944-5; *PH-254*, of 1945; *1945 R*, *PH-193*, of 1945; *PH-233*, of 1945; *PH-355*, of 1945; *PH-315*, of 1945; *PH-354*, of 1945; *PH-314*, of 1945.

Although the earliest work known by a date is 1936-7-No. 2, now referred to as “PH-591”, the thought of eliminating titles can be encountered, in documents, on March 3, 1947, after the show at Art of This Century, while discussing with Betty Parsons about his upcoming exhibition.

There will be a total of 17 paintings in the show and it may be announced in just such simple terms. At present I am debating whether to use a forward and expect my conclusion to be that I will use none. If

²⁶⁹ The work PH-351 is signed and dated Clyfford 40, 1940 and inscribed with the words “Painted Pullman “on the reverse, oil on canvas, 41 x 37 1/2 in. 104.1 x 95.3 cm, from where this title originated is not clear.

²⁷⁰ Donald B. Kuspit, “Clyfford Still: The Ethics of Art”, in *Artforum* 15, May 1977, pp. 32-40.

you hear no further word within the week it will mean that I have definitely decided to do without one.²⁷¹

James Earle Breslin, in the part of text focusing on Still, added this part of the letter:

Risking the charge of affectation I am omitting titles because they should inevitably mislead the spectator, and delimit the meanings and implications latent in the work²⁷².

Parsons replied in agreement to that decision: "I agree no forward and no titles a good idea"²⁷³. Therefore, following this dialogue, at Betty Parsons in 1947 (14 April - April 26), Still exhibited eventually 15 Untitled works²⁷⁴, now identified as *PH-281*, of 1943; *PH-286*, of 1943; *PH-303*, of 1943; *PH-327*, of 1943; *PH-141*, of 1942-3; *PH-329*, of 1944; *1945-H*; *PH-135*, of 145; *PH-300*, of 1945; *PH-285*, of 1945; *1945-T-No.1*, of 1945 (lost); *PH-304*, of 1946; *PH-941*, of 1946; *PH-330*, of 1946; *1946-N*, *PH 189*, of 1946; *PH-98*, of 1946. The works are described with the technique in the exhibition brochure list, as for example oil on blue cloth, oil on canvas, etc., with more information about the circumstances of the painting, as for example the month, or even the location. The decision of not titling

²⁷¹ Letter of March 3, 1947, quoted by David Anfam, *Clyfford Still*, PhD Thesis, quot., he then added: "Newman helped to hang some of Still's shows at Betty Parsons and Still had also seemed to agree with the Introduction he wrote to Teresa Zarnower's exhibition at Art of This Century in April-May 1946. I do not believe that the mention of the paintings' identification by numbers should be confused with his considerably later development of an elaborate code-system, although this may have been a prototype for the idea" note n. 49, p. 394.

²⁷² Clyfford Still, Note 25, in James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko, a Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 606.

²⁷³ Betty Parsons, Letter to Clyfford Still, March 8, 1947, AAA, Betty Parsons papers.

²⁷⁴ Typewritten catalogue of artworks exhibited in "Clyfford Still", Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, April 14-26, 1947, in Clyfford Still Archives, Luna Project.

the paintings did not meet any resistance of the gallery owner and he effectively displayed Untitled works, these codes were used only subsequently, as stated above. The aura that characterized Still's works, all without title, did not remain unnoticed: "they evoke curious and foreboding feelings of mysticism which are intriguing and a little frightening. To heighten the mystery, they have no titles"²⁷⁵: the abstract forms painted by Still were not provided with any hints by the artist.

At the end of 1949 Parsons started planning an exhibition for the following year and Still, also for this show, required that there should be no titles: "no allusions to interfere with or assist the spectator"²⁷⁶.

In the show of 1950 at Betty Parsons (April 17 - May 6), according to the catalogue, he displayed ten Untitled works of art²⁷⁷ although it is possible that he eventually displayed just seven²⁷⁸: these works were most probably Untitled and nowadays they are known as *1947-S, PH-371*, of 1947; *1947-8-W-No.1, PH-114*, of 1947-8; *1948-No.2, PH-943*, of 1948; *PH-397*, of 1948-9; *PH-99*, of 1948-9; *1949-A-No.2, PH-177*, of 1949; *1949-F, PH-373* of 1949.

A work of art was later in the year sold to John Stephan, and in the invoice dated 13th December 1950, it is mentioned as "Painting with Yellow Line", as a way to distinguish it from the others with the same

²⁷⁵ A.L., "Still's Legerdarmain" in *The Art Digest*, March 1947, in AAA, Betty Parsons Papers.

²⁷⁶ Still to Parsons, September 26, 1949, quot.

²⁷⁷ "Clyfford Still, SF 76 (p. 129-130) gives a checklist for this show of seven paintings. Still had however written to Parsons on December 29", in David Anfam, *PhD Thesis*, quoted

²⁷⁸ Typed catalogue of artworks exhibited in *Clyfford Still*, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, April 17-May 6, 1950, Courtesy Clyfford Still Archives, Luna Project.

measurements: some sort of description for identification purposes was of course needed²⁷⁹.

In the show of 1951 at Betty Parsons (January 29 - February 17, 1951) he displayed seven works, in this case numbered from Number 1 to Number 7, all created in 1951. It is extremely interesting that in the list documenting the show preserved on the online LUNA project, there is a description for each of them, in order to distinguish one from the other, as the measurements sometimes coincided. As for example *No. 1 deep (yellow, red border)*; *No. 2 (Predominantly black and white – patches of yellow, scarlet, and prussian blue)*; *No. 3 (ochre, navy with read streak, brown patch upper left)*; *No. 4 (dark grey and black on white – 2 red lines – yellow streak on white orange patch upper right)*; *No. 5 (lemon yellow, pink patch lower right)*; *No. 6 (matt black, bright gloss blues right side, maroon & green patches upper right)*; *No. 7 (Black- white & yellow streak on natural canvas upper right)*. The artist renounced Parsons' representation in September 1951.

The work 1952-no. 2 represents an interesting case: acquired by Alfonso Ossorio in 1953, was then known as *Gray Picture* or *Gray Painting*²⁸⁰, and was subsequently acquired by the National Gallery of Australia. Still wrote that his pictures "have no titles because I do not wish them to be considered illustrations or pictorial puzzles. If made properly visible they speak for themselves".²⁸¹ According to the National Gallery's

²⁷⁹ It has not been possible to identify the work as the one purchased by John Stephan: PH-246, was then gifted the painting to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1962 and was not exhibited in this show. Another work, purchased by Stephan and donated to the Art Institute of Chicago, was just realized in 1951-2.

²⁸⁰ Francine du Plessix, 'Ossorio the Magnificent', in *Art in America*, Vol. 55 No.2, March - April 1967, p. 56, with title as *Gray picture*, republished in Jean Lipman, ed., *The Collector in America*, Viking Press, 1970, p. 206, with title *Gray picture*.

²⁸¹ Still, quoted from a letter written to the Tate Gallery in 1972, in Ronald Alley, *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery's collection of modern art other than works by British artists*, Tate Gallery and Sotheby Parke Bernet 1981, p. 710.

sources, Patricia Still has confirmed that the Clyfford Still's records indicate the correct title of the work as being 1952 - no. 2²⁸²; therefore this documents another case in which a description took over the title in a short period of time: "even such a mildly descriptive title would not have suited Still's austere sensibility"²⁸³.

In 1952 at the show "Fifteen Americans (April 9 - 6 July 6, 1952) at MOMA he displayed seven works of art titled "Painting" followed by the year of execution (for example *Painting, 1947*; *Painting, 1949*; *Painting 1949* among others). In the catalogue a declaration of Still is present:

We are now committed to an unqualified act, not illustrating outworn myths or contemporary alibis [...] Demands for communication are both presumptuous and irrelevant. The observer usually will see what his fears and hopes and learning teach him to see. But if he can escape these demands that hold up a mirror to himself, then perhaps some of the implications of the work may be felt. But whatever is seen or felt it should be remembered that for me these paintings have to be something else. It is the price one has to pay for clarity when one's means are honored only as an instrument of seduction or assault.²⁸⁴

It is significant that in this exhibition that featured fifteen artists, many of the works did not have traditional titles: William Baziotos (*Painting, 1951*; *Number 1, 1951*; *Number 2, 1951*; among others); Edward Corbett (*Number 11, 1951*; *Number 15, 1951*); Jackson Pollock (*Number 3, 1951*;

²⁸² "Mrs Clyfford Still, correspondence with the National Gallery, 11 August 1983, NGA file 74/843, f. 165, ff. 165-165a", quot. in David Anfam, *Clyfford Still*, PhD, quot.

²⁸³ Michael Lloyd and Michael Desmond, *European and American Paintings and Sculptures 1870-1970 in the Australian National Gallery*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1992, pp. 265-7.

²⁸⁴ Clyfford Still, letter, 5 February 1952, in *15 Americans*, MoMA, 1952, p. 22.

Number 7, 1950; Number 30, 1950); Mark Rothko (*Number 10, 1950; Number 1, 1949; Number 18, 1951*); Bradley Walker Tomlin (*Number 10, 1949; Number 20, 1949; Number 1, 1951*). This is particularly meaningful as it reflected a general tendency at the time. The refusal of indicative titles might have caused various issues, as for example the title *Number 1* indicated, that was shared by three different authors.

As already mentioned, Still's major exhibition took place at the Albright Art Gallery (4 November - 13 December, 1959) in Buffalo where he showed seventy-two works, dating from 1936 to 1957. The catalogue that accompanied the exhibition included just a letter of Still directed to the curator Gordon Smith, there was no other contribution, which is a quite significant fact. Still wrote:

When I was offered the freedom of the walls of the south wing of the Albright Gallery to have a group of my works seen without qualification, tribute, or privilege and in my own right, I chose to accept.²⁸⁵

He accepted the exhibition, nevertheless insisted on denouncing "the paradox manifest by the appearance of this work in an institution whose meaning and function must point in a direction opposite to that implied in the paintings-and my own life-was accepted"²⁸⁶: this element opens many issues for what concerns the relationship public – art institutions. Still is referring to the educational function of museum, while his work was fostering silence. Titles could be considered "authoritarian devices for social control"²⁸⁷ and the renunciation of titling can be seen as a

²⁸⁵ Clyfford Still, note, in *Albright Art Gallery Bulletin*, November 1959, Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Luna Project, introduction.

²⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

political gesture. In his words Still also moved a strong criticism towards the use of myth as subject and reference for paintings, as performed for example by Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko (“The fog had been thickened, not lifted, by those who, out of weakness or for positions of power, looked back to the Old World”²⁸⁸). Titles could be seen as additional prosthetic devices to the works:

I held it imperative to evolve an instrument of thought which would aid in cutting through all cultural opiates, past and present, so that a direct, immediate, and truly free vision could be achieved, and an idea be revealed with clarity.²⁸⁹

It is important to note how the artist praised the freedom guaranteed with the show, in which he did not want to add any “qualification” to the works. He showed pieces titled just by the year followed by letter, purely for identification, such as: 1936-T; 1946 – C*; 1947 – C; 1947 – R.-No.2; 1951 – T-No.1, among others.

In his museum exhibition *Clyfford Still: Paintings*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, (November 17, 1979 - February 3, 1980) his works were numbered according to the system described before, PH- followed by a number.

Clyfford Still’s work and thoughts were influential to Mark Rothko, especially during 1946-1947. Diane Waldman wrote: “It was to Still that Rothko looked in 1946”²⁹⁰, both for painting matters and the titling practice as well. Rothko also often declared that he “learned

²⁸⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁸⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁹⁰ Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970: A Retrospective*, Harry N. Abrams, 1978, p. 51.

painting from his contemporaries in their studio”²⁹¹. Katherine Kuh confirmed this, suggesting that Rothko “was less influenced by Still’s paintings than by his thinking”²⁹²; while Ernest Briggs highlighted the impact of Still in painting itself²⁹³. Rothko has confirmed Still’s weight, writing “that he wouldn’t have clarified his own ideas without their association [...] there was a direct influence on his attitudes”²⁹⁴.

Although his persona was quite resistant towards the creation of a movement or groups, Still’s art was influential among his contemporaries, as Hedda Sterne highlighted for what concerns Mark Rothko: “Clyfford Still’s vision liberated him”²⁹⁵

During Rothko’s 1949 visit to San Francisco, Still loaned Rothko²⁹⁶ his *1948-49-W No.1*, a black painting that remained for years in Rothko’s house, and, in the summer of 1944, he showed Rothko *1944-G* and *1945-H*: titles were already non referential.

²⁹¹ Quoted in Oscar Collier, “Mark Rothko”, in *The New Iconograph*, No. 4, Fall 1947, p. 41.

²⁹² Katharine Kuh, “Cantankerous Clyfford Still’s Palette of Green and Black”, in *Washington Post*, June 15, 2001.

²⁹³ Ernest Briggs, “Interview with Barbara Shikler”, pp. 6-7, AAA; reported in Breslin, Mark Rothko, quot.

²⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁹⁵ Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, quot., p. 221.

²⁹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 226-227.

2.3. Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970)

Rothko's titling practice does not follow a linear trajectory, as a matter of fact, in his oeuvre it is possible to document, as in the case of Clyfford Still, the presence of highly suggestive and metaphorical titles, the title Untitled, colour descriptions and numbers. Although these different strategies changed in time, they cannot be exactly considered reflections of some phases. The main subject of analysis of the present research are works on canvas, with some exceptions²⁹⁷.

The level of complexity in analysing Rothko's *oeuvre* is not limited to the different kind of titles: some artworks, that in some exhibitions were shown as Untitled acquired their title in a later stage (or they lost the original title or lost the Untitled) and often it is not possible to trace philologically the occurring of the changes, their author, whether they were decided by Rothko or if he was aware of it. Moreover, some works of art are identified with more than one title, and were even oriented in different directions when exhibited. As Adam Greenhalgh has written:

There are many paradoxes in Rothko's work and practice and the disjunction between his seeming investment in a considered titling protocol and a simultaneous nonchalance or disregard for titles that accumulated subsequently is just such a paradox.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ The works on paper are currently undergoing the cataloguing and the publication will be released in 2022.

²⁹⁸ Adam Greenhalgh is currently working on the CR of the works on paper of Rothko, that will be published in phases up to 2022. He wrote this passage in an e-mail exchange with the author in September 2019.

A hint in the form of an anecdote, that demonstrates clearly the complexity and problems that are implied with the choice the Untitled, is well represented in this passage by Christopher Rothko, Rothko's son:

It was the fourth request I had received that week for a transparency of Untitled, 1969. This sort of appeal often elicits a howl of frustration from me, but today I muster all my patience, and ask just which Untitled, 1969, they might have in mind. As there are nearly 150 Rothko works that share that "title," I know that we are necessarily delving into the obscure. Even if they could give me dimensions, it is typically of little help, since there are multiple series from that year painted on nearly identically sized canvases or sheets of paper. And reproductions? More often than not they come out black on black. We are truly on "an adventure into an unknown world" just not exactly the one my father envisaged. [...] We may appear to be at several removes from the world of Rothko paintings, but in truth the distance is not so far. My father had a clear rationale when he left the question of his works' titles to be my problem and your problem. Indeed, the matter of titles in Rothko works is of utmost importance. On the most basic level this is true because there is a practical need to identify and distinguish the paintings, and doing so is often fiendishly difficult. There are far deeper reasons, however; reasons that have to do with the very essence of the paintings and how a title can significantly alter our ability to see that essence. Despite its peripheral nature, or more accurately because of its peripheral nature, the title of a Rothko painting lies near the heart of how we view, understand, and interact with that work. I will explain how this is so, but I want to note here that this statement proceeds from the premise I touch on throughout this volume: classic Rothko paintings are fragile - or rather, their effect is fragile. Their very simplicity makes them so. On the most immediate level they are nothing more than large rectangles of color on a colored background, and they can be very easily restricted to such. Much of my work as the guardian and champion of

my father's legacy revolves around trying to ensure that this happens as rarely as possible. Hence I take up my lance against titles.²⁹⁹

Facing the issue of the Untitled in Rothko is, as Christopher wrote, of a "utmost importance" and it implies to look at the dynamics that brought various works of art to be titled with not referential titles.

The catalogue titled "Mark Rothko", of the exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1998, presents, right before the presentation of the works, the following statement:

Titles of works in this exhibition are based on research by David Anfam, author of the forthcoming [published in 1998] catalogue raisonné of Rothko's paintings. Where multiple titles appear, they are listed in order of authenticity. Titles assigned by the artist, when known, given first and set in are simple italics. When such titles are not known, the earliest recorded title appears first. Other titles assigned during Rothko's lifetime are enclosed in parentheses; those assigned posthumously in square brackets.³⁰⁰

In the catalogue raisonné of Rothko's paintings an entire page is dedicated to explaining the necessary decoding of the rather complex titling issue:

Concerning titles, the priority has again been to achieve accuracy - complex as it may be rather than spurious clarity. The essential point is that the various titles under which Rothko's pictures have been known inevitably derive from many different periods and sources.

²⁹⁹ Christopher Rothko, *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out*, Yale University, 2015, Kindle Edition, chapter titled Untitled. The name of this chapter is extremely significant.

³⁰⁰ Jeffrey Weiss, *Mark Rothko*, exh. cat., Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art, 1998, missing page.

Rothko himself gave different titles to the same work. To elucidate this potentially confusing state of affairs the following principles are used. First, a signal distinction is made between titles coined in Rothko's lifetime and posthumous ones. The latter here occurs in brackets after the main designation of the picture, for example: "UNTITLED {MULTIFORM}".

Secondly, in view of the many untitled early works, basic descriptive titles have been assigned in order to help differentiate and identify them, especially for purposes of future reference. These titles are indicated in brackets, typically this: "UNTITLED [CIRCUS SCENE]

For works never titled by Rothko nor given titles at all during his lifetime, the main header of course remains "UNTITLED." Alternatively, when lost titles have been restored in the catalogue, this is reflected in the header: "OEDIPUS {UNTITLED}", plus a citation in the entry that locates the first occasion when the work was shown or published bereft of its true title or with a wrong one that has entered the literature. Minor erroneous variants are excluded from the header and restricted to a later appearance after the source whence they derive.³⁰¹

In 1968-69 Rothko, right before his suicide the following year, produced an inventory of his works, which can be considered fundamental in reconstructing his *oeuvre* in relation with titles. The works analysed were in total 798 and the basic information collected were the dimensions, date, inventory numbers, storage placement codes and occasional titles. That information was not based on records, rather on the artist personal memory; on this occasion he also dated works of the past that did not have one before. Rothko's inventory was then used by David Anfam to

³⁰¹ David Anfam, *Mark Rothko, The Works on Canvas*, Catalogue Raisonné, Yale University Press in association with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2016.

comply his *catalogue raisonné*, on which the present research is actually based. Among the 834 works listed in the CR, published in 1998, 264 works are untitled, almost one third, and they were not given titles at all during Rothko's lifetime, which means that they remain Untitled. In this bulk of works a consistent part was dedicated to two main commissions that interested Rothko in his lifetime: the commission for the Harvard Murals in 1961, installed in the Harvard's Holyoke Center in January 1964, and the Rothko Chapel, that Rothko never saw complete, inaugurated in 1971. Most of these works were untitled as they were preparatory or study works. As seen in the first chapter of the present study, preparatory works are often not titled, being premises of something else.

As the Untitled as a title is a constant presence in the production of Rothko, it is fundamental to analyse in depth this phenomenon in relation with the actual displays of the works, contemporary to their production or not, in order to understand whether exhibiting a work of art has had an impact on its title. For what concerns a quantitative analysis the presence of the untitled title, it is distributed as follows: in the period 1924-1933 (Rothko had his very first solo exhibition in 1933³⁰²), 18 works were left Untitled in a total of 54, and in the period 1934-1946³⁰³ (his very first recorded use of numbers) 80 works were left Untitled in a total of 237 works. After 1947 it is possible to record a 183 works are Untitled, which is a rather significant percentage.

Considering the rest of the works in the CR, apart from the Untitled analysed, out of the remaining 570 works 98 works are without title but in parenthesis a description is present: "basic descriptive titles have been

³⁰² When works are dated 1933-1934 they have been included in the count. For works dated 1934 they have been included in the following time period.

³⁰³ Also in this case, when works are dated 1945-46 they have been included in the count.

assigned in order to help differentiate and identify them, especially for purposes of future reference”, as for example *Untitled (Violet, Black, Orange, Yellow on White and Red)*, 1949. The research of Anfam was able to also restore titles, as *No. 4 {Yellow, Black, orange on yellow/Untitled}* dating 1953, which means that the work was originally named *No. 4* although later referred to as *Yellow, Black, orange on yellow* or *Untitled*.

Chronologically, the first work that appears *Untitled* dates to 1924-5 (n. 2 in the CR), and it is has been assigned the title *Two Jews* in square brackets. As noted, when titles are in square brackets, it means they were assigned by the author of the publication, David Anfam, to help future researchers to identify easily the work and avoid confusion with other *Untitled* works of art of the same years. For this work and other *Untitled* paintings, among the early works, in the CR there is no exhibition history listed, this means that, although for some cases it is possible to suppose that some exhibitions could not be traced back, most of these works were not shown at all during Rothko’s lifetime. It means, most probably, he did not conceive a title for them, remaining “without title”, which perhaps would be the best definition.

In November 1933, at his first solo exhibition at Contemporary Arts, New York, Rothko displayed various titled works such as *Head of Bayard* (n. 19 CR), *Minna/The blue dress* (n. 20 CR), *Portrait of a young girl* (n. 21 CR), *Portrait of a young boy* (n. 22 CR), *Conversation* (n. 23 CR), *Woman combing hair* (n. 24 CR), *Folded hands* (n. 25 CR), *The road* (n. 26 CR), *The Proposal* (n. 27 CR). All the works displayed were given these very basic descriptive titles, different from the ones that will be used in the 1940s.

In 1934 he showed some works at the Grand Central Palace in the exhibition titled “The Society of Independent Artists”, (April 13 - May 6, 1934), and he again made use of descriptive titles, such as *Women talking*, 1929-32 (n. 15 CR) or *Head of Woman*, 1932 (n. 17 CR); also in the

show at Uptown Gallery, Continental Club, New York, "Paintings by Selected Americans", 22 May-12 June 1934, he showed titled works, as for example *Lesson*, 1932-33 (n. 30 CR), and *Woman and Cat*, 1933 (n. 34 CR); same happened in the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, (January 29 - February 26, 1934). In these years it is possible to record also Untitled works of art: this proves that when works of art were exhibited, they were given a title, and when not, they mostly remained without a title³⁰⁴. These works have been displayed only later in exhibitions in the 70s-80s and 90s, as for example in the case of *Untitled*, 1941 / 1942 (n. 192 CR) that was exhibited in Atlanta in 1983 and New Orleans in 1997-8, after Rothko's death.

The Artists' Union was organized in New York in 1934, the Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), an art relief program, was launched in 1935: Rothko and Reinhardt, among others, were employed, the occasions for exhibitions grew more and more. In 1934 Rothko joined the Gallery Secession and the year later he joined the group of "The Ten" (Benz-Zion, Ilya Bolotoesky, Yankel Kufel, Adolph Gottlieb, Louis Harris, Mark Rothko, Louis Schanker and Nahum Tschacbasov) an experience that was concluded in 1940. It is in this decade that his work has had a major development but no works of art, according to the documents available³⁰⁵, were shown as Untitled until 1944, they were all given a title when displayed.

In 1939 he introduced mythic and highly imaginative titles in his production such as *Antigone*, 1939-40 (n.178 CR). This typology of titles

³⁰⁴ N. 221 CR, as *Untitled*, has been probably shown at the Gallery of Modern Art, Small in Size, October 25 – 13 November 13, 1943, but no catalogue has been found.

³⁰⁵ In 1928 Rothko participated to the exhibition at Opportunity Gallery, New York, Artists Selected by Bernard Karfiol, 15 November - 8 December 1928, but it has not been possible to trace the catalogue, although Anfam speculates about the possible display of some works a (n. 11-12 CR).

became a feature more and more consistent in the following years, supported by various writings, reflecting his interest in myths.

At Art of this Century (January 9 - February 4, 1945, "Mark Rothko Paintings", catalogue with introductory text) he exhibited fifteen works with titles, among them *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, 1942 (n. 210 CR); *The Syrian Bull*, 1943 (n. 214 CR); *Birth of Cephalopods*, 1944 (n. 231 CR); *Poised Elements*, 1944 (n. 242 CR); *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*, 1944 (n. 248 CR); *Omens of Gods and Birds*, 1945 (n. 254 CR), *Entombment I*, 1944 (n. 237 CR); *Entombment II*, 1946 (n. 222 CR). These titles "clearly indicate that Rothko's concerns with myth and ritual, prehistoric forces, biological life in general, marine organisms in particular, was still very strong at this time"³⁰⁶.

Together with Adolph Gottlieb, Rothko wrote a letter to *The New York Times*, explaining more about their research as their works had been criticized for their "obscurity" and for having caused "a bedlam of hysteria"³⁰⁷. They declared how their research was rooted in the archaic dimension, they also addressed directly the issue of titles:

These titles, and those that Pollock, Newman, Hofmann, Baziotes, and so on also assigned to their vaguely figurative abstract paintings of the mid-forties, characterize their common inspiration and sense of kinship with the mysterious power of primitive and archaic art and myth. At that time they even considered themselves, in Rothko's phrase, the 'Myth Makers'.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, quot, p. 49.

³⁰⁷ Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, "Letter to The New Yorker", quoted in Edward Alden Jewell, "Globalism Pops into View", in *The New York Times*, June 13, 1943.

³⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

Referential titles were mining the unity of Abstract Expressionism, as the authors made extremely different choices:

The abstract style of the New York School was often compromised by their rhetoric and sometimes by their choice of titles. Barnett Newman is the best example of both, with the Biblical and mythological freight his titles imposed upon often starkly abstract canvases (Abraham, The Wild) adding to the burden his critical prose forced them to bear.³⁰⁹

In these early years and in the same letter, that seemed like a manifesto, Gottlieb and Rothko made a fundamental statement regarding the relation artwork - viewer:

[...] These early program notes can help only the simple-minded. No possible set of notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of a consumed experience between picture and onlooker. [...] We favour the simple expression of the complex thought.³¹⁰

This sentence indicates that his views, also concerning titles, were changing.

In 1945 he took part to the show “A Problem for Critics” at 67 Gallery, New York where he exhibited a watercolor apparently titled *Water-color* with the artists Jean Arp, Joan Mirò, Picasso, Hans Hoffman, André Masson, Charles Seliger, Rufuno Tamayo, Leonor Krassner, Jackson Pollock, R. W. Poussette-Dart, Arshile Gorky and Adolph Gottlieb. In the catalogue the gallery owner Howard Putzel wrote:

³⁰⁹ Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 43.

³¹⁰ Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, “Letter to The New Yorker”, quot.

Classification is extraneous to art. Most labels attached to painting are unenlightening. Talent's the thing. "Isms" are literature. Nevertheless, a large part of the public that looks at contemporary painting demands classification. Possibly classification leads to clarification.³¹¹

This exhibition provoked a great debate focusing on the dialogue figurative – abstract art and articles on the topic were published on different newspapers: significant is the title “Toward Abstract or Away” published by Edward Alden Jewell on *The New York Times*. A watercolor by Rothko is published on the article and described as follows: “the delicate water-color by Rothko, reproduced, might, if you like, be a figure or a still-life, but with summer here at last I think I'd prefer to call it nonobjective”³¹². Recognizable figures were abandoning the work of Mark Rothko. The piece was, according to this review, simply exhibited as Watercolor without any title, which probably reflects the author's puzzlement with the identification of the subject.

In 1945-1946 Mark Rothko was still showing titled works of art, at The Whitney Museum of American Art (*Primeval Landscape*, 1945, n. 245 CR, was exhibited at the “Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting”, November 27 - January 10, 1945); at the show at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia (“The One Hundred and Forty-First Annual Exhibition”, January 26 - March 3, he showed *Landscape*, 1946) and at the Whitney again for the “Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Sculpture, Watercolors and Drawings”, February 5 - March 13 1946, where he showed *Baptismal Scene*, 1945. At the show at the Mortimer Brandt Gallery in New York (“Mark Rothko: Watercolors”, April 22 - May 4, 1946) he displayed titled works as in the

³¹¹ Quoted in Edward Allen Jewell, “Towards Abstract or Away”, in *The New York Times*, July 1, 1945.

³¹² Edward Alden Jewell, "A Problem for Critics", in *The New York Times*, July 1, 1945.

show at the San Francisco Museum of Art, “Oils and Water-colors by Mark Rothko”, that travelled in part to Santa Barbara. The impact of his titles at this stage is evident by a review published on the *Santa Barbara’s News Press*:

There is a type of contemporary painting considered difficult by the layman but which can be expertly analysed, foot-noted and described. In fact, there is too much of this kind of painting. But Rothko seems refreshingly pure and is content to go about his own business of articulating his own personal imagery. Perhaps we may say that Mark Rothko’s choice of myths and poetic titles yield much from his sense of fantasy and imagination. Here are a few: *Geologic Reverie*, *Poised Elements*, *Agitation of Archaic*, *Primeval Landscape* and finally *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, and *Tantalus*.³¹³

These titles were considered useful to shed some light on the works, they were interpretative tools:

Rothko increasingly defined his mythic vision by his titles as much as, if not more, than by many of the paintings. Reading the symbolism in the images from 1944 onward too explicitly does them an injustice – it presumes systems to which Rothko would have been quite adverse. But the titles were his last concrete allusions to the conventional language of narrative before even they went by 1947.³¹⁴

At the exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (December 10, 1946 - January 16, 1947), again he displayed a titled work, *Room in Karnak, 1946 (n. 306 CR)*. Numbers are only used to indicate

³¹³ Donald Bear, “Rothko’s Paintings High in Interest But Far from Easy to Analyze”, in *Santa Barbara News Press*, September 29, 1946.

³¹⁴ David Anfam, *Mark Rothko*, CR, p. 54.

possible successions of the works, as for example in the works *Entombment I* and *Entombment II*, both dating 1946.

At the exhibition of 1947³¹⁵ at Betty Parsons, the first of five one-man exhibition the gallery owner would offer to him, Rothko still showed titled works such as *The Source*, 1947; *Room in Karnak*, 1946; *Archaic Fantasy*, 1945; *Gesture*, 1945-46; *Gods and Birds*, 1945, *Verdant Memory*, 1946; *Geologic Memory*, 1946; *Rites of Lilith*, 1945; *Ceremonial*, 1945; *Primeval Landscape*, 1945; *Phalanx of the Mind*, 1945; *Entombment*, 1946; *Astral Image*, 1946; *Votive Figure of Orison*, 1945-46. The titles “summarize Rothko’s imaginative horizons. They either fan out from classical myth into distant or poetic regions or are pared to nuances, thereby anticipating the logics of the paintings”³¹⁶. As James Breslin, the author of Rothko’s biography, has noted “as any viewer of Rothko’s exhibitions between 1946 and 1948 could tell, he was still a Surrealist”³¹⁷. Rothko was therefore showing quite a distance from his contemporary Clyfford Still, with whom he had a tumultuous relationship. At this stage Still, working for his upcoming show, that took place, as mentioned in the previous section, from 12 February to 7 March 1946, had already thought about the possibility of eliminating titles. In April of 1947 Still proposed to Douglas MacAgy and Rothko the creation of a school for young artists taught by contemporary artists: this proposal will become “The Subjects of the Artist”: the school’s name meant to indicate the reference to subjects, although abstract, taking distances from European Abstract Art. It was joint by Baziotés, Motherwell, Newman, Rothko, Still and David Hare. The school closed in Spring 1949.

³¹⁵ 3-22 March 1947, *Mark Rothko: Recent Paintings*, no catalogue, an exhibition announcement and an exhibition checklist.

³¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 53.

³¹⁷ James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, quot., p. 232.

It is at the end of 1947 that probably Rothko, perhaps influenced by the revolution initiated by Still, also started to number his paintings³¹⁸, although at the show at the Whitney (December 6, 1947 - January 25, 1948) he still showed a titled work, of two years before (*Archaic Phantasy*, 1945). He realized the “multiforms” paintings that “he no longer titled but identified solely by number, a sure indication that he had turned a page”³¹⁹

At the exhibition of 1948³²⁰ at Betty Parsons, Rothko, according to the exhibition records at the Betty Parsons’ archives, showed titled works and in particular: *Phalanx of the Mind*, 1945; *Beginnings*; *Intimation of Chaos*; *Sacred Vessel*, 1947; *Dream Memory*, *Cerimonial Vessel*, 1947; *Aeolian Harp*; *Vernal Memory*, 1948; *Geologic Memory*, 1946; *Poised Elements*, 1944; *Gethsemane*, 1944; *Agitation of the Archaic*, 1944; *Dance*; *Companionship* and *Solitude* and three Untitled frames. All works realized in the years before. The review of the exhibition, titled “Diverse Modernism” by Sam Hunter, and subtitled “Transition” for the part that concerns Rothko, reverses the situation for what concerns titles.

Mark Rothko’s latest paintings at the Betty Parsons Gallery carry anonymity one step further by completely divesting themselves of content. The paint is applied in thin, tenuous washes and blottings of subdued color on these mural-size canvases that bear numbers rather than titles. The effort to avoid arresting the raw life in the pigment or the flow of its movement by any kind of definition leads to an impasse of empty formlessness, an art solely of transitions without beginning,

³¹⁸ See the short unsigned biographical summary, “New Paintings: Mark Rothko”, in *Tiger’s Eye* 9, October 1949, p. 72: “For the last two years he [Rothko] has not used titles for his paintings”.

³¹⁹ H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.A. Bois and B. H. D. Buchloch, *Art Since 1900, Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Thames and Hudson, 2016, p. 349.

³²⁰ 8-27 March, *Mark Rothko*, no catalogue, with exhibition announcement.

middle or end. Number one establishes the most definitely coherent mood and recalls Redon's color harmonies.³²¹

It is particularly meaningful that Hunter highlights two main aspects: the abandonment of content and the lack of titles, substituted by numbers³²². According to Anfam the exhibition of 1948

was the turning-point when Rothko publicly decided in favour of using numbers as against conventional titles; privately, he would already have abandoned them by the fall of the previous year. By then the images had become abstracted enough to make titling incongruous, and Rothko had just spent a summer teaching at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco alongside Clyfford Still who had jettisoned titles shortly before his own April 1947 Parsons show.³²³

There are no traces of direct reflections of Rothko on the topic, although in various other texts, especially in the subsequent years, he described his growing hostility towards words, as also his public declarations started to shrink. Another early display of Untitled works took place at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor at San Francisco, "3rd Annual Exhibition of Painting" (1 December 1948 – 16 January 1949) where the work *Untitled* (n. 371 CR) was displayed. It is therefore

³²¹ Sam Hunter, "Diverse Modernism", in *The New York Times*, March 14, 1948.

³²² According to Anfam: "Rothko's own title/number substitution at Parsons took place at the last minute: a typed checklist dated 4 March 1948 – four days before the opening – enumerates thirteen titles for the oils along the lines of "Phalanx of the Mind," "Beginnings," "Sacred Vessel," and so forth. Another checklist, handwritten and with integral consecutive numbering in the ledger book margin, duplicates these titles, while a third (again hand-written and undated but under the rubric of "April 2 - 1948") crucially has only numbers." From David Anfam, *CR*, quot., p. 57.

³²³ *Ibidem*.

officially in 1948 and not in 1950 that Rothko introduces numbers³²⁴. As Diane Waldman has written, after 1947 Rothko “no longer allows concern with symbolic meaning to stand in the way of abstract considerations”³²⁵, towards a purification of the language, he “had only to eliminate the last barrier, the vestiges of figuration, that was fully achieved in 1948”³²⁶.

Waldman also described the limitations that titling would bring: “Rothko had no fixed system for naming his canvases: most are either left untitled or identified with numbers or colors, since he probably felt that more interpretive or descriptive names would restrict their meanings”³²⁷.

According to Christopher Rothko, the titling:

began as numbering, as generic and anti-expressive a method as he could have selected. According to my sister, it was our mother who actually numbered the paintings, which would seem to indicate a truly arm's-length relationship to the whole question on the part of my father. Then there is the matter of the numbering itself. To call it random would be generous. The numbers seem to cycle on an annual basis; thus, there is a No. 10, 1949 (actually, two), and a No. 10, 1950. In practice, the numbers were probably not assigned annually but instead placed on the works at the time of exhibitions, which occurred roughly once a year. This would help explain why the numbers often do not indicate the order in which works were painted, why many paintings that were not exhibited never received number titles, and why many paintings have multiple numbers attached to them. Typically, when a Rothko painting

³²⁴ According to Venturi: “Starting from 1950, Rothko began to title his works with a number, deciding not to release any declarations”, my translation, in Alfred Jensen, *Conversazioni con Rothko*, curated by Riccardo Venturi, Donzelli, 2008.

³²⁵ Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko*, quot., p. 48.

³²⁶ *Ibidem*.

³²⁷ *Ibidem*.

has two or more numbers, it is because it was exhibited in multiple gallery exhibitions. If the number title had been of any importance, it would have travelled with the painting, so to speak. Instead, if a painting were exhibited a second time, it apparently needed to get back in line with all the works that had not been exhibited before and take a new number. No special treatment here! This bit of data serves as an unambiguous indicator of Rothko's disengagement from the matter of titles.³²⁸

With the color-field paintings, that developed since 1947 and found major expressions especially after 1949, Mark Rothko made an extensive use of numbers, that contribute to the growing riddle as a feature of his work, well described by Anfam in his introductory essay:

Whatever the standpoint, the work responds with a certain stealth, meeting in the onlooker, with the kind of frontal, vertical and symmetrical order associated with the poise of a human being [...] while revealing little about its real intent. That something has been declared remains beyond doubt. Why else this largeness and intensity? Why else a feeling that our vision is filled with the brim? Why the combative simplicity that suggest a riddle? The glowing silence and suddenness of it all seem to dare us to blink.³²⁹

At the following exhibition at Betty Parsons of 1949³³⁰, according to the exhibition records, Rothko showed 30 works, that were defined from progressive numbers from 1 to 30, while from other sources it is confirmed he showed eleven paintings, which “were designated by

³²⁸ Christopher Rothko, *Mark Rothko: from the inside out*, quot., chapter Untitled.

³²⁹ David Anfam, *Mark Rothko CR*, quot., introduction.

³³⁰ March 28 - April 16, 1949, *Mark Rothko: Recent paintings*, no catalogue, an exhibition announcement.

number and year – e.g., Number 1, 1949 – rather than by a descriptive (or portentous mythic) title”³³¹.

A review by Margaret Breuning confirms that the works were displayed without titles, she also commented on the nature of the artworks:

That the items are not titles is not important, since titles of abstractions seldom convey any relevance. But the unfortunate aspect of the whole showing is that these paintings contain no suggestions of form or design. The famous ‘pot of paint flung at the canvas’ would apply here with a nicety’. If there is a lurking significance behind these patternless works, it escapes the observer.³³²

His choice of not having external references is well noted in the review, which highlighted that “his feelings are expressed in an interplay of color that does not want to be anything else but color”³³³: similarly to Still, he wanted works to speak by themselves, without any prosthetic devices.

At the exhibition at Parsons of 1950³³⁴, he showed 22 works of art, numbered from 1 to 22 progressively. The reviewer T.B.H. noted that “the big untitled canvases, whose background seemed washed with hues rather than painted, are divided into soft rectangles”³³⁵, confirming that the works were left without a title and that the numbers were just used as references to identify the works. Rothko’s pieces on show were “without what we usually call subject matter”³³⁶. Anfam noted that the

³³¹ James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, quot., p. 246.

³³² M(argaret) B(reuning), “Mark Rothko at Parsons”, in *The Art Digest*, April 15, 1949.

³³³ Paul Moscanyi, “Art in Review”, without source, reported in AAA, Mark Rothko’s files in Betty Parsons archival records, 1949.

³³⁴ January 2-21, 1950, “Mark Rothko”, no catalogue.

³³⁵ T.B.H., “Mark Rothko”, in *Art News*, February 1950.

³³⁶ Howard Devree, “New Directions. Current Shows Reveal Steady Expansion Of Modern Movement’s Horizons”, in *The New York Times*, January 8, 1950, p. 90.

“key to the titling sequence is to realize that the paintings were simply numbered sequentially around the room”³³⁷, progressively. Numbers can therefore help in understanding how the exhibition looked like.

While the years passed, Rothko became more and more reluctant to release declarations about his work: “I have nothing to say in words which I would stand for. I am heartily ashamed of the things I have written in the past”.³³⁸ His attitude towards the public dimension of his work changed:

As Rothko eliminated recognizable forms from his paintings, he grew more reluctant to talk, publicly, about his work, abandoning even titles, as if any words would distract viewers from a necessarily uneasy confrontation with his work’s mysterious simplicity.³³⁹

In his fifth exhibition at Parsons, his last with her, of 1951³⁴⁰ he exhibited numbered works and the review, titled “Purity”, is particularly meaningful as it described the novelty that characterized Rothko’s production at this stage, highlighting its abstraction:

It is not difficult to describe Mark Rothko’s new abstract paintings at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Large or small, these canvases are divided with great regularity into horizontal, glowingly colored bands of varying width. They look like sections of a rainbow arranged by a creator responsive to the extreme line taken by certain twentieth century painters. Their tempo does not vary, and their proportions are too monumental to be spoken of as patterns. They are given no titles

³³⁷ David Anfam, *Mark Rothko CR*, quot., p. 62.

³³⁸ Mark Rothko to Barnett Newman in 1950, in Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art*, edited by M. López-Remiro, Yale University, 2006, p. 72.

³³⁹ James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, quot., p. 241.

³⁴⁰ 2-21 April, 1951, “Mark Rothko”, no catalogue, an exhibition announcement.

and, in the accepted sense of the word, they "represent" nothing. They are expressions of pure and elementary color-form relationships. For line plays no part here nor do images sully their serene expenses. One would have to be blind indeed to deny that Rothko is a subtle and sensitive colorist. He has a partiality for sonorous chords that flush and fade with the rich, rigid solemnity of strongly held organ chords. Visually those pictures are impressive and, to a certain point, they provide the emotional release that is furnished by all genuine works of art. But works of art have other obligations. They are bound in some way, to relate the spectator to his environment, to become equivalents for experience. It would seem here that the world without is ignored. But no artistic judgments can or should be final. Salutations to a pioneer who is adding to the formal vocabulary of painting.³⁴¹

Another review highlighted the freedom from pre-established associations and references to ideas: "He belongs to that group of American painters who aim at the conveyance of 'pure' emotions untainted by any process of thinking"³⁴²: his work embraced complete abstraction, freed from recognizable forms or ideas.

³⁴¹ Stuart Preston, "Mark Rothko, Purity", in *The New York Times*, April 2, 1951.

³⁴² "Rothko has discarded all associations and references to ideas. He has reduced painting to two or more colors placed side by side. Representation of any kind is excluded. The one seeks to extend his freedom to larger fields by using an increasingly simplified and more universal formula of the truth. The other is withdrawing into the redoubt of those emotions that he considers sufficiently hidden and remote to be secure from any outside intervention" from Paul Mocsanyi, "Art in Review", in *United Press Red Letter*, May 14-15, 1951.

After this show he interrupted his collaboration with Betty Parsons and begun exhibiting with Sidney Janis³⁴³. His first solo show took place in 1951³⁴⁴.

In 1952 he displayed some works at MOMA, in the already mentioned exhibition "Fifteen Americans" (April 9 - July 6, 1952), where also Still showed some pieces. Rothko, according to the catalogue³⁴⁵ and the master checklist displayed *Number 1*, 1949; *Number 10*, 1950; *Number 3*, 1950-51; *Number 4*, 1950-51; *Number 2*, 1951; *Number 18*, 1951; *Number 21*, 1951; *Number 24*, 1951. According to Anfam the year 1952 also marked the beginning of the writing of the number as a title in the verso of the canvas.

The ways works were numbered is very unclear: according to Christopher Rothko³⁴⁶ in some cases numbers were given progressively according to the order of display, but they changed in case of the exhibition of the same work in a different show, as if the number could not stick to the painting for more than one exhibition. This added various layers of confusion in Rothko's titling practice. On this topic Breslin commented: "sometimes, however, Rothko seems to have been pulling his numbers out of a hat – e.g., Number 117, 1961. Is this the hundred and seventeenth painting Rothko produced in 1961? Not likely"³⁴⁷.

In 1954 Rothko had his show at the Gallery of Interpretation at the Art Institute of Chicago (October 18 - December 31), a gallery

³⁴³ The archives of Sidney Janis are still property of the descendants and the access is unfortunately not granted, therefore it has not been possible to reconstruct what was actually on display.

³⁴⁴ January 22 - February 22, 1951, *New Paintings by Rothko*, no catalogue, an exhibition announcement and an exhibition checklist.

³⁴⁵ *Fifteen Americans*, exh. cat., MoMA, Edited by Dorothy C. Miller, with statement by the artists and others, 1952

³⁴⁶ Christopher Rothko, *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out*, quot, first chapter.

³⁴⁷ James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko, a Biography*, quot., note 25 p. 606.

characterized by a ground-breaking research and experimentation, following an invitation of the curator Katharine Kuh. All the works on display, following the reconstruction of Anfam, had numbers as titles, as *Nr. 4*, 1953; *Nr. 6*, 1954; *Nr. 7*, 1953; *Nr. 11*, 1954; *Nr. 1*, 1954; *Nr. 12*, 1951; *Nr. 10*, 1952.

The first show in which colors, according to the documentation, appear as titles is the exhibition at Sidney Janis of 1955,³⁴⁸ where he displayed *Light, Earth and Blue*, 1954; *Earth and Green*, 1955 among others. It is at this time that

color titles began to attach themselves to the paintings, although the number titles also continued into the 1960s, paralleling and sometimes overlapping with the color titles. Orange and Red on Red and its close color-based brethren, although not in absolute terms much more common than the numbers, are the way most viewers typically think of Rothko titles. How this method began—titling works by a list of their color combinations—is not known with any certainty. It is easy enough to surmise that Janis or whoever was preparing the exhibitions yearned for something more memorable, something more descriptive and evocative by which a viewer (read: potential buyer) could actually remember and identify a painting they had seen. It can be fairly certain that my father had little or no involvement in this process. Why he allowed it in the first place is the more perplexing question.³⁴⁹

In these exhibitions that included works of these decades, until Rothko's suicide, colors were introduced to title his works. Colors that can be considered a useless addendum: "His titles tell the story: 'Red, Black,

³⁴⁸ April 11 - May 14, 1955, "Mark Rothko", no catalogue, an exhibition announcement and an exhibition checklist.

³⁴⁹ Christopher Rothko, *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out*, quot, first chapter.

Orange Yellow on Yellow" [...] Yet on the whole the titles are misleading" ³⁵⁰, as they seem to limit the perception and the understanding of the artworks.

The exhibition history of Rothko can document, as witnessed, the progressive shift towards numbers, but it cannot fully explain the changes that affected titles: works of art also for example lost their numbers to acquire the title *Untitled*, as in the case of *Untitled* (N. 390 CR). The work was displayed as *No.1* at Betty Parsons in 1949 and then at MoMA in 1970 with the title *Untitled*³⁵¹. It is not possible to document what happened, but it is possible that numbers were assimilated to the title *Untitled*.

Works were also exhibited with the title *Untitled* and then re-named as in the case of *Untitled* (N. 301 CR), displayed at Charles Egan Gallery ("Twelve works of distinction", 20 May - 8 June 1946), then exhibited at Betty Parsons in 1947 with the titles *Votive Figure* or *Orison*. The work n. 332 CR shown as *No. 3* at Betty Parsons in 1948, and it was shown as *Untitled* in an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1978; the work N. 334 CR shown as *No. 11* at Betty Parsons in 1948 became *No title* at the show at Munson-Williams, Proctor Institute, Utica, "Current Trends in British and American Painting from the Collection of Mr. Edward W. Root, Clinton", New York, 3-31 December 1950. The same work was then titled *Untitled Abstraction* in 1958 and then *Untitled: Abstraction*, in 1962 ³⁵². The reconstruction of all these passages is extremely complicated, as Rothko was not particularly interested in the bureaucracy of naming the works and these titles probably were not even accurate during his lifetime.

³⁵⁰ Walter Barker, "A Closer Look at Mark Rothko, in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 29, 1970, p. 42.

³⁵¹ The MoMA archive does not possess any information regarding the change of the title.

³⁵² For a full record see the note at page 267 of Rothko's CR, by David Anfam.

After 1946 it is possible to still find descriptive titles, the Untitled as a title, although the use of numbers significantly increases. On this behalf Christopher Rothko wrote:

The first thing to understand is that after 1946, my father never titled a single one of his works. A great deal of noise just erupted in my head, a general clamor that there must be exceptions, and I have indeed immediately thought of one: Homage to Matisse from 1954. If there are others, I can assure you they are exceedingly rare.

The moment Rothko moves to full abstraction in 1946, his paintings all become Untitled. This cannot be a casual occurrence, a random event, or simply a function of apathy. My father, who was so concerned with communicating with his viewer, who toiled for decades to find a language of direct engagement, would never leave a matter like this to chance. Nor can we believe for a moment that removing the titles from his paintings was a sign from the artist that his new abstractions functioned purely in the visual realm, with no extravisual content. Anyone who is even peripherally acquainted with Rothko's work knows that he sought to express grand themes and probe deep, timeless questions in his paintings. If anything, my father has been faulted for wanting his paintings to say too much. Nineteen forty-six was also just a few years removed from his and Adolph Gottlieb's well-known statement, 'There is no such thing as good painting about nothing'. Clearly Rothko actively chose to remove the title from the interactive process between art and viewer.³⁵³

The choice of not titling the works after 1946, according to Christopher Rothko is actually contradicted by Rothko's exhibition records. Probably Christopher is suggesting that his father was willing to abandon titles

³⁵³ Christopher Rothko, *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out*, quot, first chapter.

but did not do it until 1947, after Clyfford Still made his choices at Parsons, as documented.

The enforcement of titles over numbered works in Rothko's case, similarly to what happened with Still at Art of this Century, can be exemplified Rothko by a particular case study. A work presented in the introduction of the volume that accompanied the exhibition: "Mark Rothko, A consummated experience between picture and onlooker", held in Riehen in 2001, is presented as *Untitled (Lavender and Mulberry)* and dated 1959. In the prologue of the catalogue it is possible to read that: "a work by Mark Rothko is first mentioned in the Galerie Beyeler's inventory in the spring of 1961. The entry reads "Composition, 1959, huile sur bois":

The description of the work as 'Composition, huile sur bois' may also seem unusual. In fact, the use of French here, rather than simply being a question of professional style, is indicative of a professional approach: France and in particular Paris were the unchallenged centre of artistic production of the Galerie Beyeler. [...] In the case of the gallery's first Rothko work, the unfamiliar American term 'Untitled' was elegantly circumscribed by calling the work 'Composition', in a manner reminiscent of Mondrian.³⁵⁴

The work was on the American market in 1962, and is now in the possession of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. The entry of the museum reads as title *Lavender and Mulberry*. This title was attached to the work long after it was painted and it appeared the first time when in the possession of Joseph Hirshhorn. Beforehand the work

³⁵⁴ The exhibition was titled: "A consummated experience between picture and onlooker", held at the Foundation Beyeler in Riehen, February 18 - June 24, 2001.

was known as *Composition*, when it passed through the hands of the collector to Joseph Diamond. The baptizing took place in the transaction between Diamond and Hirshhorn:

the 'poetic' title, evoking flowers and fruits with a range of sensual connotations – visual, olfactory, gustatory – that go beyond purely coloristic signification, strikes me as likely concocted by a seller trying to entice a potential purchaser.³⁵⁵

A similar case can be documented for the work N. 320 CR: it was titled *Untitled* and then shown at Edmonton Art Gallery, (1940-1950, 5 December 1975 - 18 January 1976), recorded in the catalogue as *Composition*. Probably the title *Untitled* looked like a mistake and the term composition seemed more acceptable. This term, "composition" has been already used by abstract artists in the beginning decades of the XX century.

Although various art historians have reflected upon Rothko's aversion towards titling, it is fundamental to concentrate also on his writings, in order to better document his reflections. Rothko's writings were published in Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art*³⁵⁶: this is an extremely precious source of information regarding his perspective on art; it includes all the known texts published in magazines, exhibition catalogues from 1937 to 1969. His philosophical writings were discovered only after the author's death, in 1971, and published in 2004³⁵⁷.

³⁵⁵ Adam Greenhalgh in a private conversation with the author.

³⁵⁶ Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art*, quot., 2006.

³⁵⁷ Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art by Rothko*, Yale University, 2006. This account was started by Rothko at the beginning of the 1940s, found then in 1988, long after the death of Rothko, and published in 2006.

On various occasions Rothko spoke about his desire of not conveying an interpretation of his work. The strongest resistance towards the interpretation of his work can definitely be found in the brilliant correspondence with the curator Katharine Kuh at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he had his first major museum exhibition in 1954, quoted above. For this occasion, Kuh imagined the conversation with Rothko, in the exchanged letters preceding the show, to be included in the exhibition catalogue.

The aim of the curator, explicit in the letter, was to understand what Rothko was looking for in art and his way of achieving it. Rothko's resistance emerged early on in the very first letters, as in the case of the text sent by him to Kuh on July 14th: he did not want to "create the pretence of answers to questions which either should not be answered, or which are essentially unanswerable"³⁵⁸. And soon after, in the same document, commenting:

Forgive me if I continue with my misgivings, but I feel that it is important to state them. There is the danger that in the course of this correspondence an instrument will be created which will tell the public how the pictures should be looked at and what to look for. While on the surface this may seem an obliging and helpful thing to do, the real result is paralysis of the mind and imagination (and for the artist a premature entombment). Hence my abhorrence of forewords and explanatory data.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁸ Katharine Kuh in Mark Rothko, *Writings on art*, quot., p. 90.

³⁵⁹ The text is reported in Katharine Kuh, "Mark Rothko", in *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 4, Nov. 15, 1954, p. 68. The exhibition of Mark Rothko was the first organized by Kuh, once she was nominated the Art Institute's first Curator of Modern Painting and Sculpture after her experience of the Gallery of Interpretation, a permanent

In fact, titles can be considered instruments “to tell the public how the pictures should be looked at and what to look for”³⁶⁰, in order to provide an interpretation, a possible reading. The only investment Rothko would make would be “in the psyche of sensitive observers who are free of conventions of understanding”³⁶¹. In the show he displayed works of art designed by numbers, as mentioned.

In an interview, released in 1943, he was asked to comment about the literary, poetic titles used in the 1940s:

Interviewer: ‘Mr. Rothko, you may take the next question. Are these pictures really abstract paintings with literary titles?’

Mark Rothko: ‘Neither Mr. Gottlieb’s painting nor mine should be considered abstract paintings. It is not their intention either to create or to emphasize a formal color-space arrangement. They depart from natural representation only to intensify the expression of the subject implied in the title—not to dilute or efface it. If our titles recall the known myths of antiquity, we have used them again because they are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. They are the symbols of man’s primitive fears and motivations, no matter in which land or what time, changing only in detail but never in substance, be they Greek, Aztec, Icelandic, or Egyptian. And modern psychology finds them persisting still in our

space to visual education for adults, present in The Art Institute of Chicago between 1944 and 1953.

³⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

³⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

dreams, our vernacular, and our art, for all the changes in the outward conditions of life'.³⁶²

In different publication Rothko has been asked to comment on his titling practice. Regarding his works *Untitled (Multiforms)*³⁶³ he wrote: “They have no direct association with any particular visual experience, but in them one recognizes the principles and passion of organisms”³⁶⁴. After the use of poetic titles, words were perceived as obstacles:

The progress of a painter's work [...] will go towards clarity: towards the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer.³⁶⁵

His intention in painting was not to transmit notions:

The communication between the work and the spectator is not based on the model of information transmission, but participates in the same indeterminacy that distinguishes the forms of the paintings.³⁶⁶

³⁶² Radio script for WNYC, October 13, 1943 in Clifford Ross, *Abstract expressionism: creators and critics*, quot., pp. 210-12, republished in Ellen G. Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism. Context and Critique*, Yale University, 2005.

³⁶³ “The title Multiform does not seem to have been used before Rothko’s death. It appears for the first time in the catalogue for the Rothko exhibition at the 1970 Venice Biennale. It is thought by the staff of the Marlborough Gallery, who prepared this catalogue, that Rothko used the term Multiform generically when referring to his transitional paintings of 1948–49” from Michael Lloyd & Michael Desmond, *European and American Paintings and Sculptures 1870-1970 in the Australian National Gallery*, 1992, p. 248.

³⁶⁴ Mark Rothko, “The Romantics Were Prompted”, in *Possibilities I*, Winter 1947-8, without page, reported in John Goldin, *Paths to the Absolute. Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still*, Thames & Hudson, 2000, p. 163.

³⁶⁵ Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art*, quot., p. 49.

³⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

The ineffability, together with the subsequent preference for numbers or non-evocative titles, are a distinctive feature of Rothko's *oeuvre*, well described by Christopher's Rothko in his introduction to the writings of his father:

My father's artwork seeks to express the inexpressible — we are far removed from the realm of words... The written word would only disrupt the experience of these paintings; it cannot enter their universe. [...] As his works exemplify, writing and painting involve different kinds of knowing.³⁶⁷

Titles' communicative power is annihilated in Rothko's turn to numbers and colors: language is, as T.E. Hume wrote, "essentially inaccurate"³⁶⁸.

As Riccardo Venturi has well noted, the attention of Rothko on installation details, such as lights, measurements and disposition, implies a focus on a non-verbal communication, rightly in a period when the white cube is becoming the predominant model³⁶⁹.

What has also been highlighted in Rothko's work is the revolt against authority, as Leo Bersani and Ulysse Druot have discussed, indeed, he wrote: "My work is without authority. You will learn nothing from it".³⁷⁰ Rothko progressively denied the edifying and educative value of Western art, which caused a devaluation of the powers of art itself, often reduced to a mere educational or communicative tool.

³⁶⁷ Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art*, quot., introduction.

³⁶⁸ T. E. Hulme, Herbert Read, *Speculations; essays on humanism and the philosophy of art*, London, K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.; New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc., 1924 quoted in James Johnson Sweeney, "New Directions in Painting", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 18, No. 3, March 1960, pp. 368-377.

³⁶⁹ Riccardo Venturi, *Mark Rothko: Lo spazio e la sua disciplina*, Electa, 2007.

³⁷⁰ Leo Bersani, Ulysse Druot, *Arts of Impoverishment. Beckett, Rothko, Resnais*, Harvard University, 1993, p. 3.

According to Bersani and Druot pedagogic functions “blocked our efforts to appropriate the work”³⁷¹. Rothko’s desire was to impede the otherwise inescapable production of meanings alien to this work of art”³⁷². Many artists, at this time, decided to protect the work from “the vulgarizing powers of language itself”³⁷³. Most of the artists working within the framework of Abstract Expressionism supported a vision according to which “the only way we can receive a painting is to see it”³⁷⁴.

Rothko was able to address the “blindness we have in mind”³⁷⁵. He was, as well as Still, “performing an unprecedented act of self-concentration, self-reference and self-reflection”³⁷⁶. The impact of Clyfford Still’s vision, and his decision of progressive distancing himself from words, has been crucial to Rothko, in fact, “his work is retrogressive: it returns us to a moment of looking we may have always skipped” due to “certain economy in human evolution”³⁷⁷.

It is important to highlight that this ambition to the absence of language was not just due to the presence of abstract forms, as

his work destroys any comfortable opposition between abstraction and realism. The representation of a simultaneous emergence of form and erosion of boundaries does not depend on the figurative nature of the elements used.³⁷⁸

³⁷¹ *Ivi*, p. 4.

³⁷² *Ivi*, p 93.

³⁷³ *Ivi*, p. 94.

³⁷⁴ *Ivi*, p. 100.

³⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 121.

³⁷⁸ *Ivi*, p. 122.

Indeed, it is possible to note that: "Abstract Expressionist images invoke; they do not depict. They confront; they do not describe"³⁷⁹.

³⁷⁹ Clifford Ross, *Abstract Expressionism*: quot., 1990, p. 34.

2.4. Ad Reinhardt (1913 - 1967)

Although Ad Reinhardt's catalogue raisonné is currently being produced by the Ad Reinhardt Foundation, various publications as well as his writings, constitute an extreme relevant source to document the variations of titles in his work. More than the exhibition history, his declarations, in interviews or in his personal notes, reveal an extraordinarily rich capacity of discussing themes regarding the production of art, and also its reception:

Reinhardt was also an extremely articulate man who wrote constantly, both in private notes and in published essays, to clarify for himself and explain to others his often controversial but always interesting views about art.³⁸⁰

Being highly imaginative, he even wrote "a contribution to a journal of some future art historian" or "Auto-interviews". Through these texts and others, he documented most of the passages of his career development³⁸¹. "Pushing of the visible toward the brink of the invisible"³⁸²: this sentence well illustrates Reinhardt's accomplishment, he was aiming to "a sort of painting that functions like anti-matter to other painting, a mirror image (not the opposite) of what other artists would consider painting to be"³⁸³.

³⁸⁰ Barbara Rose, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, University of California, 1991, introduction.

³⁸¹ *Ivi*, p. 9.

³⁸² Priscilla Colt, "Notes on Ad Reinhardt", in *Art International*, Vol. VIII, No. 8, October 20, pp. 32-34.

³⁸³ Brian O'Doherty "The Anti Matter", in *Arts and Artists*, Vol.1, January 1967, p. 105, quoted in Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 42.

As it happened with other protagonists of the movement, his affiliation with Abstract Expressionism has been discussed, as he undertook a quite independent path:

he abhorred their biomorphism, emotionalism, and cult of individuality. His connections with the New York School dissolved in the early 1950s when he began producing his single-color, geometric paintings.³⁸⁴

Reinhardt has been one of the greatest influencers of his contemporaries and he also has had a huge impact on the rising Minimalism: his position has often been considered straddling these two movements. He also expressed the same thoughts in an auto interview:

“You’re the only painter who’s been a member of every avantgarde movement in art of the last thirty years, aren’t you?

“Yes” he said

“You were a vanguard pre-abstract-expressionist in the late thirties, a vanguard abstract-impressionist in the middle forties and a vanguard post-abstract expressionist in the early fifties, weren’t you? “Yes” he said.³⁸⁵

The gallery owner Betty Parsons exhibited his paintings on almost yearly basis, between 1946 and 1960 she held ten exhibitions of Reinhardt’s work. In the show of 1946 at her gallery (October 22 -

³⁸⁴ Press release, “Concentration: Ad Reinhardt”, December 10 - 8 February, 1981, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

³⁸⁵ Ad Reinhardt, “Reinhardt paints a picture” in Barbara Rose, *The selected writings*, quoted, p. 11. This interview is particularly brilliant as Reinhardt’s answer is always “Yes”.

November 9) the artist exhibited 25 paintings, among them: *Orange and Blue, Red and Yellow, Palette Knife Structure, Yellow Green, Blue Ink Drawing, Olive Green Relationship, Circular Movement, Abstract Painting, Crayon and Ink Painting*, all titled works.

At the exhibition of 1947 (November 24 - December 13) he showed again titled works: *sign painting, industrial design, interior decoration, tapestry cartoon, skewbald, painting for a modern cave, fancy figures, rough characters, space markings, bits of information, pure myth, color scheme for a social painting, structure-matter, aesthetic device 33, painting idea, object lesson, rock that expressionist dreamboat*. These titles and the ones showed at the following exhibitions seem to have an evocative aspect (defined “leg pulling titles”³⁸⁶).

At the show of 1948 (October 18 - November 6) at Betty Parsons he displayed: *Painting Idea, Aesthetic Fact, Bits of Information, Non-Iconic Signs, Significant Form, Space-markings, Triptych Structure, Direct Communication, Minds'eye matter, Transcendental Tanget, Dialectical Spectacle, Organized Movement, Sensible Characters, Determined Relations, Fancy Figures, Sensuous Surface Remark, Concrete Experience, Color-comment, Non-Objective Feeling, Abstract Thought (#1) Abstract Thought (#2)* and two other works that are listed but non titled. The show was accompanied by a catalogue: Reinhardt reflected on the perception of Abstract art by critics as “‘an empty picture’, ‘a cold meaningless decoration, ‘a hot unintelligible mystery’”³⁸⁷. His reaction followed soon after: “pure painting is not degree or illustration, distortion, illusion, allusion or delusion [...] pure painting is a direct experience and an

³⁸⁶ Unknown, “The Art Galleries, a Look at Franconi, Hofmann, Reinhardt and others” in *Daily Worker*, November 28, 1947, p. 13.

³⁸⁷ Ad Reinhardt, “Incidental note”, in Ad Reinhardt catalogue, October 18 - November 6, 1948, AAA, Betty Parsons Papers.

honest communication”³⁸⁸. The exhibition of 1949 (October 31 - November 19) was together with Marie Menkin³⁸⁹.

At the show of 1951 (4 - 23 June) he showed 22 works, just indicated by their progressive number, from 1 to 22, while in 1952 he showed 14 or 16 works pre-numbered. In 1953 (November 16 - December 7) he displayed 20 or 23 works of art progressively numbered. He abandoned titles between the late 1948 and 1950, with the desire to avoid references, insisting that his work was without theme and fixed structures, not desiring “to be involved with representations, associations, anguish, poetry, drama, structure, paint qualities, plasticity, relationships, experiments, rules”³⁹⁰.

It is interesting to note that at the show “Twenty five years of abstract art” (17 October - 5 November, 1960) 32 works were on show at the Betty Parsons and at the Section Eleven Gallery: the titles of the works were indicated with “painting” plus the year of execution, going back even to 1937: *painting* 1937; *painting* 1938, *painting* 1940, *painting* 1949. This means that probably these works had their titles removed or were never exhibited before, as in the case of many Rothko’s pieces.

At that time Reinhardt’s work didn’t experience a particularly positive reception: the artist continued to hold lectures and contribute to magazine and newspapers “explicating and defending an aesthetic only recently beginning to be understood”³⁹¹. He intervened often to say what his work was not about, “Reinhardt presents the spectator with an artefact from which he’ll get nothing unless he’s prepared to look really hard at something outside himself”³⁹². As Still and Rothko were doing,

³⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁸⁹ No catalogue of this show has been found.

³⁹⁰ Unknown author, in *Herald Tribune*, November 11, 1956, p. 14.

³⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

³⁹² David Sylvester, “Blackish”, in *New Statesman*, June 12, 1964.

he was attempting to free the spectator from pre-existing conceptions and structures, at the same time denying the pure formalism of his works: "painting is more than the sum of its parts: beyond formalism"³⁹³.

The apparent lack of content has been at the core of many critiques Reinhardt has received, critiques that the artist justified as due to the fact that "there wasn't anything there for them [critics and viewers] to latch on"³⁹⁴. His works "come with a list of compounding difficulties. They are difficult to see, to understand, to photograph, to reproduce, to exhibit"³⁹⁵, the lack of titles contributed to this growing riddle.

Various historians have noted how problematic is the issue of titles and dates in Reinhardt:

Apart from this uncharacteristic lapse, Reinhardt identified his works by number or as "Untitled" or "Abstract" and/or "Blue/Red/Black Painting," the only acknowledgment of the outside world being its temporality in the occasional identifying date (Red Painting, 1952). Even this, however, was a minor distraction. The nature of Reinhardt's mature work precluded his "branding" the painting with signature and date and he was notoriously cavalier even about signing and dating the canvas verso, often appending the date when the canvas was exhibited, not painted, and sometimes painting over canvases which remained with their original (and at least by traditional criteria now erroneous) date. Reinhardt's unremitting distaste for narrative is

³⁹³ Ad Reinhardt, [dialogue for a proposed cartoon], untitled, undated notes, c. 1966, in Ad Reinhardt Papers, n/69-101, frame 685, quoted in Michael Corris, *Ad Reinhardt*, Reaktion Books, 2008.

³⁹⁴ Ad Reinhardt, "An Interview with Ad Reinhardt", in *International*, No. 10, December 20, 1966, reprinted in *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, quot., no page number.

³⁹⁵ Annika Marie, "Ad Reinhardt: Mystic or Materialist, Priest or Proletarian?" in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 96, No. 4, December 2014, p. 464.

summed up in another of the 'Documents of Modern Art,' dated 1947, in which he tersely riposted Rothko's and Gottlieb's 'There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing' by changing the last word to 'something'. One is tempted to make more of the statement than its rejection of narrative, since the paintings are not only about nothing external to itself, nothing 'out there', nothing in particular, etc. but about nothingness itself—although Reinhardt would probably eschew even the latter interpretation as excessively referential. His aesthetic represents the most austere reductivism imaginable, a merciless assault on incrustations of paint and cant alike in search of degree-zero art, or, as he put it, 'the last paintings which anyone can make'³⁹⁶

Ad Reinhardt declared: "That kind of poetry I've always objected - I've always objected to titles. And the whole idea of bridges this was also an issue in the '30s all the time."³⁹⁷ Reinhardt's exhibition records, as mentioned, actually contradict his statements: his titles until 1948 can definitely be considered highly suggestive. In this interview in particular he was referring to Robert Motherwell's work *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, (1965-67) in which, according to the artist, the genitalia of the bull were referenced. He was basically criticizing the Surrealist elements of the works³⁹⁸.

³⁹⁶ Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, quot., p. 44. The very last sentence is quoted from Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, H.N. Abrams, 1981, p. 158.

³⁹⁷ Ad Reinhardt, Interview by Harlan Phillips, 1964, the interview was conducted by Harlan Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, in circa 1964.

³⁹⁸ Herbert Feber described the different tendencies that were present in NYC at that time: "There was no conscious move in the direction of what later became known as Ab-Ex [abstract expressionism] at that time in '47. There was a good deal of appreciation for the surrealists who were living in the country at that time. Baziotes and Motherwell were not showing at that gallery. They were showing at Sidney Janis. They were very closely associated with the surrealists. And Motherwell had studied with one of them. Baziotes became sort of adopted by the surrealists as a surrealist himself. Then when they began...

It is in 1962 that he published his most important piece of writing: “Art-as-Art” in which he summarized his thought and the very aims of his research:

The one object of fifty years of Abstract Art is to present art-as-art and as nothing else, to make it into the one thing it is only, separating and defining it more and more, making it purer and emptier, more absolute and more exclusive – non-objective, non-representational, non-figurative, non-imagist, non-expressionist, non-subjective. The only and one way to say what Abstract Art or art-as-art is, is to say what it is not.

[...] No other art or painting is detached or empty or immaterial enough.³⁹⁹

His writings, collected and edited by Barbara Rose, often referred to his desires of not influencing the spectator through words in order to let her/him fully experience his work of art, highlighting “the value of abstraction and the importance of negation”⁴⁰⁰. His pursuit of abstraction was accompanied by a denial of any interpretation, which reached a significant apex in the term *Art-as-Art*, included in the mentioned book as a Manifesto: “The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else. Art as art is nothing

several of them-Rothko and Still and Baziotés and Motherwell-showed at Art of This Century, Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, which was really originally a surrealist group, they were very conscious of their surrealist direction. When they left that gallery and moved to Betty Parsons, they began to explore other directions. And very soon thereafter Rothko began to make his transitional paintings which were not his typical oblong on top of oblong.” Interview with Herbert Ferber on June 2, 1981. The interview was conducted by Phyllis Tuchman as part of the Archives of American Art's Mark Rothko and the oral history project, with funding provided by the Mark Rothko Foundation.

³⁹⁹ Ad Reinhardt, “Art-as-Art”, quot, reported in *Barbara Rose, Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, University of California Press, 1991, p. 20.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

but art. Art is not what is not art"⁴⁰¹. His "manifesto" contains many hints regarding the denial of the power of words and the wish for a purification of the artworks:

No lines or imaginings, no shapes or composings or representings, no visions or sensations or impulses, no symbols or signs or impastos, no decoratings or colorings or picturings, no pleasures or pains, no accidents or ready-mades, no things, no ideas, no relations, no attributes, no qualities – nothing that is not of the essence. Everything into irreducibility, unreproducibility, imperceptibility. Nothing 'usable,' 'manipulatable,' 'salable,' 'deable,' 'collectible,' 'graspable.' No art as a commodity or a jobbery. Art is not the spiritual side of business.⁴⁰²

The sentences seem to recall Still's anger and criticism towards the choice of Guggenheim to title his works, an action that rendered them fully 'manipulatable,' 'salable,' 'deable,' 'collectible,' 'graspable.', as Reinhardt wrote.

The relational, associative element of the work was often highlighted by art critics, and progressively denied by Reinhardt:

Glaser: 'Your painting, then, seems to be more about ideas that it is about materials'.

Reinhardt: 'Well, it has nothing to do with materials any more than it has to do with ideas. Whatever I do has come from doing and only relates to what's done'.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰² *Ibidem*.

Glaser: 'How do you feel about people who do interpret and explain them?'

Reinhardt: 'I give them no encouragement'.

Glaser: 'Do you think that the struggle between abstraction and surrealism in the 30s and 40s have relevance today?'

Reinhardt: 'Yes, I do. I have liked some of the abstract - expressionist painters, but I have never been able to stand their titles or what they called 'poetry'. Their association with poets has been disgraceful. I have gone into this so many other times - perhaps the worst thing one can say about painting is that it's poetic or dramatic or literary or musical, or like some other art'.⁴⁰³

In another passage he declared the distance from Duchamp,⁴⁰⁴ whose titles were a fundamental constituent of the work.

The impact of the art market on the work is significant, according to Reinhardt: "a painting is changed and transformed when it leaves the studio. It takes a labelling and a beating when it is out in the world, when it is bought and sold and handled like a commodity. This is ridiculous"⁴⁰⁵.

Reinhardt rejected explanations of his work, preferring to define it as

A pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting—an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness), ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but art

⁴⁰³ Ad Reinhardt and Bruce Glaser, "Reinhardt paints a picture. Auto-interview", in *Art News*, March 1965, pp. 11-17, reported in Barbara Rose, "Art as Art", quot., p. 20.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

(absolutely no anti-art). [...] I am the most negative, in expressionless, the least op, least pop, least national, least social.⁴⁰⁶

By the early 1940s, Reinhardt was eliminating “impurities”: shapes, colors, forms, and at the end of the decade, as demonstrated, also titles. He denied any anecdotal values of his work, reaching an ultimate purity of the “black paintings”. This dimension of renunciation, described masterfully by Yve-Alain Bois, led Reinhardt to be “the strongest resolution in this century against any kind of instrumentalization of art”⁴⁰⁷.

The summarizing theoretical framework that characterizes his production was expressed by Reinhardt himself:

A clearly defined object. independent and separate from all other objects and circumstances, in which we cannot see whatever we choose or make of it anything we want, whose meaning is not detachable or translatable. A free, unmanipulated and unmanipulatable, useless, unmarketable, irreducible, unphotographable, unreproducible, inexplicable icon. A non-entertainment, not for art-commerce or mass-art-publics, non-expressionist, not for oneself.⁴⁰⁸

The progressive renunciation to all the elements, that were associated with art interpretation, has characterized the work of Reinhardt, until reaching this consideration: “Art is not for the communication of ideas. There is no message in fine art. [...] My work has been called

⁴⁰⁶ Ad Reinhardt, untitled, in *Newsweek*, March 15, 1965.

⁴⁰⁷ Yve-Alain Bois, “The Limit of Almost”, in *Ad Reinhardt*, exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1991, pp. 25-26.

⁴⁰⁸ Ad Reinhardt, “Art as Art”, 1955, in Barbara Rose, *The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, quot., p. 83.

meaningless for 30 years⁴⁰⁹. The title of an article appeared on the Herald Tribune in 1956 well synthesized the perception of Reinhardt's works: "Pictures of No Theme, No Structure, No Art". The author doubted the seriousness of the entire show as he walked into the gallery⁴¹⁰.

⁴⁰⁹ Ad Reinhardt, quoted in Matt Mitchell, "Fine Art Has Its Own Meaning", in *The Register-Guard* 1963, in Ad Reinhardt Papers, AAA

⁴¹⁰ Unknown author, "Pictures of No Theme, No Structure, No Art", in *Herald Tribune*, November 11, 1956, p. 14.

2.5. Jackson Pollock (1912 - 1956)

First of all, it should be mentioned that Pollock's naming of artworks represents an enormously problematic issue "given the range and inconsistency in Pollock's use of titles"⁴¹¹. Various interpretations of these titles have occurred over time, without often taking into account that the artist might not have been the author who actually conceived them. Not much analysis has therefore been given to the Untitled titles, as they did not provide a sufficient basis over which to speculate. The formalist analysis of Jackson Pollock's work, mostly undertaken and fostered by Clement Greenberg, has also prevented the development of a dedicated study on the title Untitled in his *oeuvre*. The lack of a title might have not been functional to the defined, mythological narratives that were dedicated to the figure and persona of Jackson Pollock. His much-celebrated belonging, if not even as the father itself of Abstract Expressionism, was almost challenged by the same artist: "I don't care for 'abstract expressionism'...and it's certainly not 'nonobjective,' and not 'nonrepresentational' either. I'm very representational some of the time, and a little all of the time"⁴¹².

The lack of external sources and references in his work was highlighted on various occasions:

The thing that interests me is that today painters do not have to go to a subject-matter outside themselves. Modern painters work in a

⁴¹¹ Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, MoMA, 1999, p. 240.

⁴¹² Selden Romdan, "Interview with Jackson Pollock", in *Conversations with Artists*, Devin-Adair, 1957, no page number.

different way. They work from within.⁴¹³

What was made clear in 1951, by Pollock himself, was the openness that should characterize his work, especially in the reception of the spectator:

William Wright: 'I suppose every time you are approached by a layman they ask you how they should look at a Pollock painting, or any other modern painting what they look for how do they learn to appreciate modern art?'

Jackson Pollock: 'I think they should not look for, but look passively - and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they are to be looking for. [...] I think it should be enjoyed as music is enjoyed'.⁴¹⁴

Titles, according to this sentence, should not interfere with the perception of the spectator.

In his *catalogue raisonné* it is possible to read:

The titling of 'abstract' paintings and drawings has always posed special problems. Pollock's work does not always lack identifiable subjects, but the thematic material is so personally construed that imposing titles can be presumptuous and deceptive. We have tried to establish the exact wording of Pollock's own titles and to record any published variants. We have also recorded those titles given to works by the artist's dealers, or assigned to their property by collectors,

⁴¹³ William Wright, "An Interview with Jackson Pollock", 1950 in H. Harrison, *Such Desperate Joy: Imagining Jackson Pollock* (104), Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, p. 104.

⁴¹⁴ William Wright, "Interview with Jackson Pollock", The Springs, Long Island, New York, Late 1950. Broadcast on Radio Station, Westerly, Rhode Island, 1951 printed in Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock: Interviews*, quot., p. 20.

which have become current through usage. We have not accepted 'Untitled', 'Painting', 'Drawing', 'Composition', and the like as legitimate titles, since their perpetuation in the literature leads only to confusion, especially when the object so labelled is not reproduced. For works without titles we have nevertheless sometimes invented our own descriptive titles. The function of all our inventions is, however, to identify rather than to interpret. It was in part to avoid imposing glosses through words that Pollock himself arbitrarily gave numbers to many of his major paintings. In all cases Pollock's own titles are distinguished from others by the typographic devices.⁴¹⁵

Although "imposing titles can be presumptuous and deceptive" in the CR it is, as mentioned, not possible to find any works left Untitled, which, as it will be demonstrated, were rather a consistent element in Pollock's production.

The recognition that the artist's dealer, circle of friends and collectors, have had a key role in renaming these works is particular significant, as it sheds light on the fact that the Untitled title was not commonly accepted in the 1940s and 1950s, in particular due to the fact that it caused confusion, both in the market and more in general in identifying unequivocally a work of art. This has already been witnessed in the work of Still and Rothko, as many of their works were re-titled. Moreover, as it will be discussed, the evocative aspect, rather than a purely descriptive element, were considered crucial in attributing a title to a work of Jackson Pollock. Of course, this action leads to many consequences, indeed, labels never account the changes or the different authors of titles. The authoritative function of labels usually aims to

⁴¹⁵ Francis Valentine O'Connor and Eugene Victor Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonne of Paintings, Drawings and Other Works*, Yale University Press, 1978, introduction.

provide the viewer with an interpretation, rather than suspension. This operation nevertheless might be problematic also for the future, as in time these titles risk to be considered as Pollock's original titles.

In his CR the typographical apparatus distinguishes the titles, also according to the kind of brackets used, in a rather complex structure.

Titles which have become standard through usage and publication but which are not Pollock's are enclosed in parentheses. The first appearance of these titles is recorded under Exhibitions and References. Terms such as 'Untitled', 'Painting', 'Drawing', and 'Composition' have not been accepted by us as titles even though these nontitles have been published and they are cited in the Exhibitions and References. Titles given by owners to otherwise untitled works are enclosed in quotation marks "".

Titles given to works by the editors for purposes of identification are enclosed in square brackets. Titles are descriptive and non-interpretive.

Numbered titles which also have verbal titles are subject to the same treatment as purely verbal titles. When both titles are Pollock's, they are separated by a colon; otherwise, they are separated by a slash. The title most commonly cited in the literature is given first.⁴¹⁶

Looking at Pollock's first exhibitions is extremely useful as it is possible to document that the artist deliberately made use of the Untitled as a title, which clearly, as stated, has not been accepted in the *catalogue raisonné*. With the progression of his exhibitions and consequent expansion of his market, the presence of the Untitled title diminishes, until being superseded by the use of numbers.

⁴¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. xviii.

The transition to more abstract works took place between 1934 and 1938, five years in which Pollock's figures lost their contours, as in the work *Going to the Pond*, 1934-38, (N. 28 CR) or *Solitude*, 1934-8, (N. 29 CR) or *Seascape*, 1934, (N. 3).

In 1945 he showed at The Arts Club of Chicago (March 5 - 31) nine titled works: *The Moon-Woman*, *The Guardians of the Secret*, *Search for a Symbol*, *Stenographic Figure*, *Wounded Animal*, *Pasiphae*⁴¹⁷, *The Mad Moon-Woman*, *Male and Female*, *The Magic Mirror*, and 8 paintings titled *Untitled*. The title *Pasiphae* originates from a suggestion of James Johnson Sweeney, after Peggy Guggenheim expressed some resistance towards the original title *Moby Dick*⁴¹⁸.

Pollock's following show, defined as "one of the landmark exhibitions of the 20th century"⁴¹⁹, took place from November 9th to the 27th 1943, at Art of This Century, the newly opened gallery of Peggy Guggenheim, at 30 West 57th Street, in New York. Pollock had already shown the work *Stenographic Figure* (1942) in the Spring Salon for Young Artists, that was not left unnoticed. Jasper Sharp, with other co-authors, has contributed significantly to the reconstruction of the gallery's chronology and exhibition history in the publication titled *Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler: The story of Art of this Century*. This publication has well managed to reconstruct all the passages preceding

⁴¹⁷ "Well aware that many of Jackson Pollock's paintings acquired their evocative titles from dealers and collectors, the compilers of the catalogue raisonné duly attempt to sort out the artist's own language from the contributions of the middlemen. Yet the title of Pasiphaé, which the catalogue treats as authorial, actually originated with a curator from the Museum of Modern Art, who happened to be on the scene when Pollock's patron, Peggy Guggenheim, objected to the artist's original choice of Moby Dick. "Who the hell is Pasiphaé?" Pollock reportedly inquired", reported in Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles*, quot., Kindle edition, chapter 1.

⁴¹⁸ Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock, Interviews*, quot., p. 242.

⁴¹⁹ Susan Davidson, Philip Rylands, Jasper Sharp, *Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler: the story of art of this century*, Hatje Cantz, 2005, p. 298.

and following the show. The leaflet of the solo exhibition above mentioned presents in the show the following works: *Male and Female* (c. 1943), *The Guardians of the Secret*, *The She-Wolf*, *The Moon-Woman* (1942-3), *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*, *The Mad Moon-Woman*, *Stenographic Figure*, *Conflict*, *The Magic Mirror*, 6 works titled *Untitled*, plus gouaches and drawings. James Johnson Sweeney, who brought with Herbert Matter and Reuben Kadish, Pollock's work to the attention of Peggy Guggenheim, did not refer directly to any of the works in his essay for the catalogue. According to Sharp, in the summer of 1943, Pollock completed *The Moon Woman*, *Male and Female* and *Stenographic Figure*. Putzel advised Pollock⁴²⁰ to work also on small scale works, more marketable, as for example is the case of the painting *Conflict*. Two loans were present as listed in the leaflet: *The Magic Mirror* of 1941 and an canvas titled *Untitled*, described as a gift by the Pollock to the photographer Herbert Matter. A *New York Times* review by Edward Alden Jewell, dating November 14th, which is quoted in the catalogue of the show held at MoMA, curated by Francis V. O'Connor, in 1965, and in the collection of *Writings, Interviews and Reviews* of 1999, reads:

These cannot be called non-objective abstractions, for most of them have fairly naturalistic titles, and two that are marked 'Untitled' have become particularized by the artist since the catalogue went to press. What looks slightly like a dog begging turns out instead to be 'Wounded Animal'. The most recent canvas, a scattered design against pink, represents 'Male and Female in Search of a Symbol.'⁴²¹

⁴²⁰ Howard Putzel quoted in Susan Davidson, Philip Rylands, Jasper Sharp, *Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler*, quot., p. 299.

⁴²¹ Edward Alden Jewell, "Art: Briefer Mention" in *The New York Times*, November 14, 1943, quoted in Francis V. O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock*, New York, MOMA, 1967, p. 30.

With the term “particularized” Jewell means probably that the two Untitled works were then titled. Francis V. O'Connor, in reconstructing the chronology regarding the show, confirms Jewell's review. In fact, he wrote:

It is not clear whether two paintings were added to the show - Male and Female in Search for a Symbol (title later changed to Search for a Symbol) and Wounded Animal - or whether these titles were given to paintings listed as Untitled.⁴²²

It seems clear from the review that the 2 Untitled works were then titled in the exhibition. Jasper Sharp, author of the reconstruction of the Art of this Century wrote, considered Jewell's review:

Two other works listed as Untitled had been given titles in time for the show's press preview. One, described by the New York Times as looking 'like a dog begging' had become Wounded Animal [note 117, which is missing in the final notes] (1943). Pollock's last, disciplined canvas was the other, now titled Male and Female Search for a Symbol.⁴²³

The work *Male and Female Search for a Symbol* was apparently renamed by Pollock himself as *Search for a Symbol* in 1945⁴²⁴.

Maude Riley described the extreme strong personality evident from the show, quoting James Johnson Sweeney's introductory essay describing as “lavish, explosive, untidy” Jackson Pollock's painting. He wrote:

⁴²² *Ivi*, p. 29.

⁴²³ Unfortunately, the note 117 is actually missing in the publication.

⁴²⁴ Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock, Interviews*, quot., p. 259, note 42.

We like all this. Pollock is out a-questing and he goes hell-bent at each canvas, mostly big surfaces, not two sizes the same. Youthfully confident, he does not even title some of these painted puzzles. And among the 'untitled' is a pink one he brought in, still wet with new birth, which probably pleased and surprised him no end, when hung. Otherwise, he has painted a She-Wolf, slat blue and thoroughly mussed with animated white lines; a complicated Guardians of the Secret with a wolf guarding below, and Beckmann panels right and left; a series of Moon-Woman pictures which allow full license of symbolism, form and explanation, for it is his legend, completely of his own devising.⁴²⁵

The author Clement Greenberg also reviewed the exhibition, denouncing how the titles seemed pompous:

Both this painting [Guardians of the Secret] and 'Male and Female' (Pollock's titles are pretentious) zigzag between the intensity of the easel picture and the blindness of the mural. The smaller works are much more conclusive: the smallest one of all, 'Conflict', and 'Wounded Animal'. with its chalky incrustation, are among the strongest abstract paintings I have yet seen by an American.⁴²⁶

In another review, it is possible to find the mention of *The wounded animal*⁴²⁷, which indicates that the title was attached to the work when exhibited. A weekly radio program, "The Artist Review Art" at the New York radio station *WEVD*, reported on Pollock's solo show:

⁴²⁵ Maude Riley, "Fifty-Seventh Street in Review: Explosive First Show", in *The Art Digest*, 13, No. 4, November 15, 1943.

⁴²⁶ Clement Greenberg, "Art", in *The Nation*, No. 22, November 27, 1943.

⁴²⁷ Robert M. Coates, "The Art Galleries: Situation Well in Hand", in *The New Yorker*, No. 19, November 20, 1943.

Somehow there is a tremendous impact in the heaviness of the pigment he uses and while I liked number 11 Untitled, I was faintly annoyed by the affectation leaving it untitled. Half of the show bear strange sort of mythological names and the other half are simply Untitled. I can understand that Mr. Pollock may resent having to put a literary interpretation on a pure painting expression but then he should be consistent - leave them all untitled.⁴²⁸

This review clearly demonstrated the difficulties Pollock's work presented: some of the titles are given, others not, making the public perceiving that something was missing in the latest, as there was just a heavy absence of the evocative aspects.

In November 1944 *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America* was published by Sidney Janis and it included a reflection of Pollock's work titled *She Wolf*: "Any attempt on my side to say something about it, to attempt explanation of the inexplicable, could only destroy it"⁴²⁹.

The work now titled *Composition with Pouring I* can be considered as an interesting case study, it is also one of Pollock's first experiments with the technique of the dripping. In the CR the work is present, listed as n. 92, as [Composition with Pouring I], 1943: these square brackets are rather problematic as, according to the above introductory notes, "titles given to works by the editors for purposes of identification are enclosed in square brackets"⁴³⁰. But this title appears in various publications: in a

⁴²⁸ Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The Artist Reviews Art records, 1943-1944, transcription of the radio program. Quoted after Tobias Vogt, *Untitled, Zur Karriere unbetitelter Kunst in der jüngsten Moderne*, PhD Thesis, Fink Wilhelm GmbH, Co.KG, 2006, p. 87.

⁴²⁹ Sidney Janis, *Abstract & Surrealist Art in America*, Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944, no page number.

⁴³⁰ Jackson Pollock, *CR*, quoted, introduction.

recent Pollock's show at The Museum of Modern Art, New York⁴³¹ the work was presented as *Untitled [Composition with Pouring I]*. According to the CR, the history of the work lists as property: Mr. and Mrs Herbert Matter (gift of the artist), Duveen Galleries, Mr. and Mrs. Patrick McGinnis, a passage through Sotheby & Co., London and Marlborough Fine Art, London. In the notes it is written that the work was given by Pollock, as a gift, to Mr. and Mrs Herbert Matter, and was shown at Art of This Century, the above-mentioned exhibition, as a loaned piece and with the title *Untitled*. Lucinda Barnes notes that

It is interesting to note that Pollock gave *Composition with Pouring 1* – the current name for one of those three small allover pictures shown at Art of This Century in 1943 – to his friends Herbert and Mercedes as a very late wedding gift, shipping it out to Los Angeles once his exhibition closed in late November.⁴³²

The work, according to the wife of Herbert Matter⁴³³ got lost after the exhibition and it emerged on an auction at Sotheby's Impressionist and Modern Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture, on March 31, 1965, in the position No. 71 in the catalogue, with the title *Untitled*. Pollock died in 1956: it is not possible to determine, from sources, when this new title emerged.

⁴³¹ Organized by Kirk Varnedoe, with Pepe Karmel, November 1, 1998 - February 2, 1999, New York, MoMA.

⁴³² Lucinda Barnes, *Hans Hofmann: The Nature of Abstraction*, University of California, 2019, p. 81.

⁴³³ According to recent news the word was claimed by Matter after being displayed at the MoMA but the owner noted that it was legally acquired: "Mr Judah bought it from Marlborough Fine Art of London for £5,350 in 1965 shortly after the dealers had bought it for £3,500 at an auction at Sotheby's" in Will Bennett, "Widow ends fight for 'gift' from Pollock", in *The Telegraph*, 29 November 2000, online edition, accessed on May 20, 2020.

Another interesting case is related to the earliest example of the dripping technique: a painting of late 1946, titled *Free Form* “a name suggested by the dealer and the collector who acquired it”⁴³⁴, according to Greenberg.

In 1945 (March 19 - April 14) Pollock had his second show at Art of This Century: he exhibited 13 titled paintings (*Horizontal on Black, Square on Black, The Totem-Lesson I, The Totem-Lesson II, The Night Dancer, The First Dream, Portrait of H.M., Night Ceremony, Night Mist, Two, There Were Seven in Eight, Night Magic, Image*)⁴³⁵. Also on this occasion, it is possible to find some reaction to his titles, as for example the definition of the title *There Were Seven in Eight* a “purely cryptic understatement”⁴³⁶, and the note that two other works might be called “explosion in a shingle mill”⁴³⁷. Titles were perceived as a provocation, being highly mysterious: they did not allow for a clearer approach to the painting, as mentioned by another reviewer: “Thus the identification of forms in paintings surrealistically titled *The Night Dancer* or *There Were Seven in Eight* is rendered almost impossible”⁴³⁸. Howard Devree, reviewing the show, noted the “violent emotional reaction which never is clarified enough in the expression to establish true communication with the observer”⁴³⁹, perhaps referring to the very ambiguous titles.

In 1946 (2 April - 20 April) he had his third show at Art of This Century and displayed titled works: *Totem Lesson 1, Totem Lesson 2m The*

⁴³⁴ Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock*, quot, p. 88.

⁴³⁵ Pollock’s exhibition history has been meticulously reconstructed by Francis O’Connor, *Jackson Pollock*, quot.

⁴³⁶ Howard Devree, “Among the New Exhibitions”, in *The New York Times*, March 25, 1945.

⁴³⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴³⁸ Anonymous, “The Passing shows: Jackson Pollock”, in *Art News*, No. 4, April 1, 1945.

⁴³⁹ Howard Devree, “Among the New Exhibitions”, quot.

Night Dancer, Moon Vessel, Troubled Queen, Water Figure, Circumcision, among others.

In 1947 (January 14 - February 1) he had his fourth show at Art of This Century, on this occasion he displayed: *Sounds in the Grass and Accabonac Creek*. *Sounds in the Grass* included *Croaking Movement, Shimmering Substance, Eyes in the Heat, Earth Worms, The Blue Unconscious, Something of the Past, and The Dancers, Triangle, Bird Effort, Gray Center, The Key, Constellation, The Tea Cup, Magic Light*. Miss Guggenheim's Mural was also included. In Greenberg's review, there is perhaps a reference to the progressive drift toward abstraction: "Pollock has gone beyond the stage where he needs to make his poetry explicit in ideographs"⁴⁴⁰. Pollock released his notorious statement in *Possibilities*⁴⁴¹ in the winter of 1947: the power of the unconscious is well described.

In 1948 (January 5 - 23) at the gallery of Betty Parsons, that took over Peggy Guggenheim, as she returned back to Europe, he showed titled works: *Enchanted Forest, Cathedral, Lucifer, Vortex, Phosphorescence, Unfounded, Gothic, Shooting Star Sea Change, Full Fathom Five, Comet, Magic Lantern, Watery Paths, Prism, The Nest, Alchemy, Reflections of the Big Dipper*. In this case it is clear from several reviews, that these titles were considered as a tool, granted by the artist, to allow the spectator "to see" what was really present in the paintings. Pollock was described as belonging to a group of "symbolic Expressionists" although he is "much harder to understand than most of his confreres"⁴⁴². Interesting to note is the use of the verb "to understand" in reference to art: "such a style has its dangers: for the threads of communication between the artist and the

⁴⁴⁰ Clement Greenberg, "Art", in *The Nation*, 164, No. 5, February 1, 1947.

⁴⁴¹ Jackson Pollock, "My painting" in *Possibilities I*, Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947/1948, p. 23.

⁴⁴² As for example in the review by Robert M. Coates, "The Art Galleries: Edward Hopper and Jackson Pollock", in *The New Yorker*, January 17, 1947.

spectator are so very tenuous"⁴⁴³. According to Judith Wolfe these titles were given to the pictures shortly before the opening: "Mary and Ralph Manheim had been invited over to help in the titling of these works in preparation for the exhibition"⁴⁴⁴. These titles have often been read as echoes of Jungian influences on Pollock's practice, but, as sources prove, they mostly were not original of the artists. These readings, emerged especially in the 1970s, have been criticized⁴⁴⁵.

In the book *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, edited by Pepe Karmel an entire chapter is dedicated to the issue of titles, in particular in the 1940s and 1950s. Lee Krasner well described the lack of Pollock's interest in titles: "He hated titling and tended to put it off until the last moment, usually just before a show"⁴⁴⁶. Regarding the title *Circumcision*, Lee Krasner⁴⁴⁷ well specifies the origin of the term:

When he [Jackson Pollock] asked me to come in and look at the painting with him, he said 'What does it suggest to you?' And I said 'I honestly don't know, Jackson. The only thing that comes clearly to me is that it's a ritual of some sort.' It was following that, not instantly, but sometime later, that Pollock said: 'What do you think of Circumcision? 'Gee, that's fine.' That's how the painting got titled"

⁴⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴⁴ Judith Wolfe, "Jungian Aspects of Jackson Pollock's Imagery", in *Artforum*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1972, p. 72.

⁴⁴⁵ In particular Augustine Zander noted how Pollock owned only one book in his library dedicated to Jungian analysis; Pollock' doctors denied any direct, explicit reference to Jung during Pollock's treatment, in Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *Peggy Guggenheim Collection*, quot., p. 630.

⁴⁴⁶ "Conversation with Lee Krasner", published in Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, quot., p. 240.

⁴⁴⁷ Lee Krasner's perspective on titles is presented at the end of the chapter, with also a reflection on Pollock's later use of numbers as titles.

Krasner's clear recollection of this episode reveals that Pollock — in this case, s in others — adopted an ex post facto title.⁴⁴⁸

Lawrence Alloway described how Pollock's titles have purely an evocative power: "if paintings are 'inexplicable,' titles can serve only to evoke the kind of experience Pollock associated with the creative experience generally"⁴⁴⁹. Too often his titles have been considered precious and essential keys, granting the access to the full experience of his artistic production.

It is extremely meaningful to note that these titles should be considered as "an ex post facto association to the artist 'inexplicable' depicted image"⁴⁵⁰ and most probably not suggestions of any possible clear readings of the works, as Lee Krasner confirmed, referring for example to the *Moon Woman*: "All we can make if it really is that he relegates the moon to female [...] I would not venture to go beyond that"⁴⁵¹. Also the title *Don Quixote* was also a title given by Peggy Guggenheim⁴⁵².

The Jungian analysis of Pollock's work was contrasted also for what concerns the painting *Alchemy*, whose title was invented by his

⁴⁴⁸ Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *Peggy Guggenheim Collection*, quot., p. 634.

⁴⁴⁹ Lawrence Alloway, *Jackson Pollock. Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors from the Collection of Lee Krasner Pollock*, London, Marlborough, Fine Art, June 1951, no page number.

⁴⁵⁰ Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, quot., p. 240.

⁴⁵¹ "Conversation with the author Zander, Mar. 6, 1981, reported in Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *Peggy Guggenheim Collection*, quot., p. 633.

⁴⁵² "The title *Don Quixote* was given to the picture by Peggy Guggenheim Lee Krasner stated, in conversation with the author (Mar. 6, 1981), that she has never heard this title and was certain Pollock has not either. Its anecdotal nature would have been entirely alien to him: 'Pollock always said: painting is not illustration'", in Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *Peggy Guggenheim Collection*, note 1, p. 640.

neighbour Ralph Manheim⁴⁵³. All this confirms that “Pollock behaved in a highly intuitive, spontaneous fashion in accepting or rejecting proposed titles” as “the canvases, by their very nature, resist the assumption that they are intended to be legible or decipherable in symbolic or theoretical terms”⁴⁵⁴.

In 1948 Pollock introduced numbers to title his works. A written memoir of Roueché is particularly meaningful, as it sheds light on the minor relevance titles had in Pollock’s view:

‘What’s it called?’ we asked.

‘I’ve forgotten’, he said, and glanced inquiringly at his wife, who had followed us in.

‘Number Two, 1949, I think’, she said. ‘Jackson used to give his pictures conventional titles: ‘Eyes in the Heat’ and ‘The Blue Unconscious’ and so on but now he simply numbers them. Numbers are neutral. They make people look at a picture for what it is – pure painting.’ ‘I decided to stop adding to the confusion’. Pollock said. ‘Abstract painting is abstract. It confronts you. There was a reviewer a while back who wrote that my pictures didn’t have any beginning or any end. He didn’t mean it as a compliment, but it was. It was a fine compliment. Only he didn’t know it.’ ‘That’s exactly what Jackson’s work is’ Mrs. Pollock said. ‘Sort of unframed space.’⁴⁵⁵

Pollock’s restraint and reluctance to speak directly about his work was well noted:

⁴⁵³ Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock*, Pushcart Press, 1987, p. 100.

⁴⁵⁴ Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *Peggy Guggenheim Collection*, quot, p. 637.

⁴⁵⁵ Barton Roueché, “Unframed Space” in *The New Yorker*, No. 24, August, 1950, p. 16.

He was given to extreme reticences and long, intense silences which waived any direct discussion of his art. Verbal communication must have seemed at least clumsy fiat for probing one's innermost feelings through art, and he mistrusted words as a diversion and a possible betrayal.⁴⁵⁶

An early example of numbered works is *Number 1*⁴⁵⁷, 1948. Collectors did not immediately appreciate Pollock's radical new style, and when this work was first exhibited it remained unsold for two years, acquired by the MoMA in 1950.

Numbers were problematic and it happened that many works got re-titled as for example the work of 1948, known today as *Number 13A: Arabesque* was actually just numbered and *Arabesque* was just added later⁴⁵⁸: a synthesis well described by this review: "There is a Joycean beat in his blood. But also a vast silence."⁴⁵⁹; or the work *Number 1*, of 1950 that was renamed by Clement Greenberg *Lavender Mist*, so the label at the National Gallery of Art in Washington reads: *Number One*, 1950 (*Lavender Mist*).

On the occasion of the XXIV Venice Biennale (May 1 - September 30, 1948) he displayed 6 works, listed in the official catalogue as: *Eyes in the Heat*, *The Moon-Woman*, *Two*, *Circumcision*, *Drawing*, *Don Quixote*.

⁴⁵⁶ Sam Hunter, *Jackson Pollock*, quot., introduction.

⁴⁵⁷ The work was first named No. 1: it is exhibited with this title in the shows *Abstract painting and sculpture in America*, MoMA Jan. 23 - Mar. 25, 1951, *XXV Anniversary Exhibition: Paintings from the Museum Collection*, Oct. 19, 1954 - Feb. 6, 1955; Jackson Pollock, Dec. 19, 1956 - Feb. 3, 1957, MoMA.

⁴⁵⁸ "Although "Arabesque" is most likely a name given to the mural by Pollock's friends" from the online record of the Yale Art Gallery.

⁴⁵⁹ The work is mentioned as *Untitled* in the catalogue of the "Initial exhibition", David Ferbert Gallery, October 5 - October 31, 1959. Although other works are described the words seem to match "Number 13A as they refer to "all eyes of the night" that could describe the nocturnal element of the painting.

In the first exhibition of the year at Betty Parsons (January 24 - February 12) in 1949, his second at this gallery, he displayed 26 works numbered from 1 to 26, all dating 1948, some with descriptive details used to identify them: *Number 1 (Aluminum, Black, White)*, *Number 2 [Shadows]*, *Number 3, Number 3, Number 7 (Black and Red)*, *Number 8, Number 9 [Summertime]*, *Number 10 [The Wooden Horse]*, *Number 11, Number 13 [Arabesque]*, *Number 16, Number 18 [Black, Red, Yellow]*, *Number 24 [White Cockatoo]*, *Number 23, Number 26*; on paper: *Number 4 (Gray and Red)*, *Number 6 (Blue, Red, Yellow)*, *Number 12 (Yellow, Gray, Black)*, *Number 14 (Gray)*, *Number 13 (Red, Gray, White, Yellow)*, *Number 17, Number 19, Number 20, Number 21, Number 22, Number 23*. The lack of traditional titles could have been noted by Sam Hunter who spoke about “advanced stage of the disintegration of the modern painting” coexisting with a “with a possibly liberating and cathartic effect”⁴⁶⁰. The lack of representation was well noted by other art critics: “Most of Jackson Pollock's paintings, at the Betty Parsons Gallery, resemble nothing so much as a mop of tangled hair I have an irresistible urge to comb out”⁴⁶¹. The author identified the works (“those called Blue...”) by the colors while Clement Greenberg⁴⁶² referred to them by their numbers. The use of colors to title the works, according to Paul Mmocsanyi “emphasizes that the interplay of color and material”⁴⁶³.

Time Magazine gave visibility to Pollock's work in 1947 while *Life* offered a quite substantial reportage in 1949, the author mentioned the possibility of considering Pollock's work “inexplicable”⁴⁶⁴.

⁴⁶⁰ Sam Hunter, “Among the New Shows”, in *The New York Times*, January 30, 1949.

⁴⁶¹ Emily Genauer, “The Week in Art”, in *The New York World - Telegram*, February 7, 1949.

⁴⁶² Clement Greenberg, “Art”, in *The Nation*, No. 168, February 19, 1949.

⁴⁶³ Paul Mmocsanyi, “Jackson Pollock”, in *United Press Red Letter*, February 9, 1949.

⁴⁶⁴ Dorothy Seiberling, “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?”, in *Life*, No. 6, August 8, 1949.

Also at his third show at Betty Parsons Gallery in New York (November 21 - December 10) of 1949 he displayed 34 oils, "all are numbered rather than titled"⁴⁶⁵: 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 7 [*Out of the Web*], 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 [*Birds of Paradise*], 31, 32, 33, 34, 33 [*Mural(?)*]. Robert Coates highlighted, in his review, the renunciation to representation and the fact that the works were not titled.⁴⁶⁶ The shift to numbers was due to the fact that they "were neutral and made the viewer look at a painting for what it was — pure painting"⁴⁶⁷. Finally his work is understood and perceived as "The Infinite Labyrinth", so the title of the review goes, continuing with the description of "a paradox of abstract form in terms of an alphabet of unknown symbols [...] a cuneiform or impregnable language [...] subtle patterns of pure form"⁴⁶⁸. Pollock

gives us a series of abstract images [...] which by their nature can never be read of an original and indisputable meaning, but must exist absolutely, in the paradox that any system of meaning successfully applied to them would at the same time not apply, for it would fail to exhaust their inherent meaning.⁴⁶⁹

At the XXV Venice Biennale (June 3 - October 15, 1950) Pollock showed 3 paintings, purely identified with numbers: *Number 1*, 1948, *Number 12*, 1949 and *Number 23*, 1949. Reviews also included some criticism, as for example in the case of Douglas Cooper:

⁴⁶⁵ Amy Robinson, "Jackson Pollock", in *Art News*, No. 48, December 1949.

⁴⁶⁶ "The pieces are not titled, so I won't try to list them" in Robert Coates, Reviews, in *The New Yorker*, December 3, 1949.

⁴⁶⁷ Lee Krasner, quoted in Barton Roueché, "Unframed space", quot., p. 16.

⁴⁶⁸ Parker Tyler, "Jackson Pollock: The Infinite Labyrinth", in *Magazine of Art*, No. 3, March 1950.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

The younger painters in this pavilion mostly imitate well-known Europeans, with a singular lack of conviction and competence though on a very large scale. One of them, however, Jackson Pollock, is a striking exception. He is undeniably an American phenomenon. Working without brushes, he spreads his canvas on the floor and dribbles the contents of paint-tubes on to it from above. The result is an elaborate if meaningless tangle of cordage and smears, abstract and shape less, but to quote Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art, it is 'an energetic adventure for the eyes. Personally, I think this is merely silly.'⁴⁷⁰

The same year he had a solo show at the Ala Napoleonica of the Museo Correr in Venice (July 22 - August 12) and he displayed twenty oils (*The Moon-Woman, Two, Don Quixote, Circumcision, Bird Effort, Direction, The Water Bull (lent by the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam), The Dancers, Sounds in the Grass [Croaking Movement], Eyes in the Heat, Full Fathom Five, Enchanted Forest, Vortex, Magic Lantern, Prism, Alchemy, Reflections of the Big Dipper (lent by the Stedelijk Museum), Earth Worms, Sea Change, Number 16, 1949*; 2 gouaches, and 1 drawing. The first catalogue printed for the occasion (with the closing date as August 12) included remarks by Miss Guggenheim and an essay, titled "I Guazzabugli di Jackson Pollock" by Bruno Alfieri, whose words are particularly meaningful:

Jackson Pollock's paintings represent absolutely nothing: no facts, no ideas, no geometrical forms. Do not, therefore, be deceived by suggestive titles such as 'Eyes in the Heat' or 'Circumcision': these are phony titles, invented merely to distinguish the canvases and identify

⁴⁷⁰ Douglas Cooper, Untitled, in *The Listener*, July 6, 1950.

them rapidly... No picture is more thoroughly abstract than a picture by Pollock: abstract from everything. Therefore...no picture is more automatic, involuntary, surrealist, introverted and pure than a picture by Pollock. I do not refer to Andre Breton's surrealism, which often develops into a literary phenomenon...I refer to real surrealism, which is nothing but controlled impulse...

It is easy to detect the following things in all of his paintings: Pollock has broken all barriers between his picture and himself: his picture is the most immediate and spontaneous painting...Jackson Pollock is the modern painter who sits at the extreme apex of the most advanced and unprejudiced avant-garde of modern art... Compared to Pollock, Picasso who for some decades has troubled the sleep of his colleagues with the everlasting nightmare of his destructive undertakings, becomes a quiet conformist, a painter of the past.⁴⁷¹

At his fourth show at Parsons (November 28 - December 16) of 1950, he displayed works identified only by numbers, something that forced critics, such as Robert Coates to write in the review that "reference to them here [is] a little bit dull"⁴⁷². It is clear that in these exhibitions with numbers the lack of references had quite an impact on the observers: "the spectator himself who must have a certain amount of imagination in order to comprehend"⁴⁷³.

In another review of the show, that was later published in *Art News* with the renowned photographs of Hans Namuth, Robert Goodnough also gave relevance to the lack of titles:

⁴⁷¹ The text, titled "Piccolo discorso sui quadri di Jackson Pollock" was printed in the only edition of the *Arte Moderna*, in 1950.

⁴⁷² Robert M. Coates, "The Art Galleries: Extremists", in *The New Yorker*, December 9, 1950.

⁴⁷³ Will Grohmann, "Der Tagesspiegel", Berlin, September 7, 1958 reported in *The new American painting, as shown in eight European countries, 1958-1959*, organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art, MoMa, exh. cat., p. 11.

Pollock used to give his pictures conventionally symbolic titles, but – like many contemporary abstractionists – he considers them misleading, and now simply numbers and dates each work as it is completed.⁴⁷⁴

In 1952 Pollock left Betty Parsons and started to work with Sidney Janis. In a 1955 exhibition he displayed also recent works, with titles such as *White Light*, *Echo*, perhaps following the suggestion of the gallery owner⁴⁷⁵.

⁴⁷⁴ Robert Goodnough, “Pollock Paints a Picture”, in *Art News*, No. 3, May 1951.

⁴⁷⁵ Unfortunately, Janis’ archives are not accessible, but the revival of titles could perhaps be linked to this collaboration,

2.6. Willem De Kooning (1904 - 1997)

The lack of a *catalogue raisonné* of the *oeuvre* of Willem de Kooning limits the possibility of a complete and detailed survey of the presence of the title Untitled in his work. The catalogues of his exhibitions, as well as his writings and interviews, should be considered the main source of information regarding the presence of the Untitled as a title. Another layer of difficulty is due to his working habit:

De Kooning's pictures are worked on over and over again during long periods of time. He did not sell paintings with any regularity until 1954. Old pictures in the studio often were painted out, or drastically changed. He does not sign pictures until they leave the studio. He almost never dates them, and in the case of the few dated paintings and drawings, the dates usually refer to when the picture was sold or given a friend-which might have been several years after completion. This has made the chronology of de Kooning's work a problem of interior stylistic examination.⁴⁷⁶

His attitudes also reflected the refusal of categorization, as he often

emphasized his tendency to consider numerous alternatives as he addressed a topic, avoiding conclusiveness and termination; he often shifted or reversed the drift of the conversation. In formal interviews, he would argue by association, allowing himself to move from thought to thought without making a definitive judgement.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁶ Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, New York, G. Braziller, 1959, p. 32.

⁴⁷⁷ Richard Schiff, "De Kooning controlling de Kooning" in *Willem de Kooning: tracing the figure*, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, Princeton University, 2002, p. 165.

Moreover, he dismissed categories as, as it has been already mentioned, "it is disastrous to name ourselves [the artists]"⁴⁷⁸, preferring not to use language to frame art movements.

Catalogues dating from the 1950s also include works of art that are Untitled, as for example *Untitled abstraction*, 1931; *Untitled painting*, 1937; *Untitled pen drawing*, 1938; *Untitled woman*, 1948. Works that are Untitled coexist with works titled, as the renowned series of *Women* (developed since 1950, he had painted *Woman I* in June 1950⁴⁷⁹) and with works of art that are variously titled, as for example *Zurich*, *Noon*, *Valentine*, *The Moraine*, among others. Willem de Kooning made frequent use of the title Untitled at the end of the 1960s and especially in the 1970s. This choice was also discussed by David Sylvester in an interview with the artist. It is relevant to note how the process of painting, well analysed in the interview, determined the cloudiness of the subject of his works of art:

David Sylvester: 'The pictures done since the *Women*, are they all landscapes? A lot of them are just called *Painting* or *Untitled*, aren't they? But they are not, in any case, non-objective; or are they in some cases?'

Willem de Kooning: 'No, they're emotions, most of them, the later ones. Most of them are landscapes and highways and sensations of that, outside the city. With the feeling of going to the city or coming from it, you know.'

[...]

DS: 'Does it matter to you whether other people see?'

⁴⁷⁸ Willem de Kooning, quoted in Robert Goodnough, ed., "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35", 1950, no page.

WDK: 'No, I don't mind.'

DS: 'It's sufficient that other people should get the painting as a configuration of forms.'

WDK: 'Yes. They can interpret it their ways. I mean, it is all right'.

DS: 'And this isn't merely something that you recognise after the picture is finished? This thing becomes conscious for you while you are in the course of painting a picture?'

WDK: 'I feel now, if I think of it, it will come out in the painting. In other words, if I want to make the whole painting look like a puddle, you know, like a lot of puddles, for instance – maybe the end of the day, when everything is very light but not in sunlight necessarily – and so, if you have this image of this puddle and if I really think about it, it will come out in the painting.'

[...]

DS: 'So it's only when you've been working on the picture for a certain amount of time that you begin to see what the picture is going to refer to?'

WDK: 'Not always. Sometimes I set out with that idea, but most of the time when I do that, I find something else. I have this measure, you see, so it's no contradiction really'.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁸⁰ "Willem de Kooning," in David Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, quot., pp. 43-57. Recorded in March 1960 in New York City, this interview was aired on the BBC, in 1960, under the title "Painting as Self-Discovery".

The freedom offered to the spectators has been a feature characterizing the production of various artists ascribed within Abstract Expressionism. Dore Ashton, for instance, noted that de Kooning's works "described an abstraction, vacancy" and that "the subject of the paintings was the void"⁴⁸¹.

There is a particularly rich passage in a text by De Kooning that well describes the open-end dimension of works of art, as he conceived them.

The word 'abstract' comes from the light-tower of the philosophers, and it seems to be one of their spotlights that they have particularly focused on Art. So the artist always lighted up by it. As soon as it-I mean the 'abstract'- comes into painting, it ceases to be what it is as it is written. It changes into a feeling which could be explained by some other words, probably. But one day, some painter used 'Abstraction' as a title for one of his paintings. It was a still life. And it was a very tricky title. And it wasn't really a very good one. From then on the idea of abstraction became something extra. Immediately it gave some people the idea that they could free art from itself. Until then, Art meant everything that was in it-not what you could take out of it. There was one thing you could take out of it sometime when you were in the right mood-that abstract and indefinable sensation, the aesthetic part-and still leave it where it was. For the painter to come to the 'abstract' or the 'nothing' he needed many things.⁴⁸²

Titles define and, as De Kooning wrote, even the title *Abstract* has the power of a boundary: it clearly determines what something is and what is not. The fact that, through the title, the work of art can change, until

⁴⁸¹ Dore Ashton, *The Unknown Shore. A View of Contemporary Art*, Little, Brown & Co, Boston 1962, p. 97.

⁴⁸² Willem de Kooning, "What abstract art means to me" in Ross, Clifford, *Abstract expressionism: creators and critics*, quot., p. 37.

“becoming something extra” is particularly meaningful⁴⁸³. He clearly, as noted by Richard Schiff, refused “any fundamental distinction between abstraction and figuration”⁴⁸⁴. According to de Kooning “the Art in it is the forever mute part you can talk about forever”⁴⁸⁵. As he mentioned in the interview with Sylvester, the works painted after the series *Women* are “emotions”, “sensations” in a “not yet living in a world where everything is self-evident”⁴⁸⁶.

De Kooning was particularly suspicious of the use of words regarding art, in a particularly rich passage he described what happened when too many efforts were spent in the analysis of a subject of a painting:

The ‘nothing’ part in a painting until then—the part that was not painted but that was there because of the things in the picture which were painted—had a lot of descriptive labels attached to it like ‘beauty’, ‘lyric’, ‘form’, ‘profound’, ‘space’, ‘expression’, ‘classic’, ‘feeling’, ‘epic’, ‘romantic’, ‘pure’, ‘balance’, etc. Anyhow that ‘nothing’ which was always recognized as a particular something—and as something particular—they generalized, with their book-keeping minds, into circles and squares. They had the innocent idea that the ‘something’ existed ‘in spite of’ and not ‘because of’ and that this something was the only thing that truly mattered. They had

⁴⁸³ From *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, vol. 18, no. 3, spring 1951, pp. 4-8. Willem de Kooning read this paper at a symposium held at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, on February 5, 1951, in conjunction with the exhibition *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America* reprinted in Willem de Kooning, “What abstract art means to me” in Ross, Clifford, *Abstract expressionism: creators and critics*, quot., p. 37.

⁴⁸⁴ Richard Schiff, “De Kooning controlling de Kooning” in *Willem de Kooning: tracing the figure*, quot., p. 155.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ivi*, p. 36

⁴⁸⁶ *Ivi*, p. 37.

hold of it, they thought, once and for all. But this idea made them go backward in spite of the fact that they wanted to go forward. That 'something' which was not measurable, they lost by trying to make it measurable; and thus all the old words which, according to their ideas, ought to be done away with got into art again: pure, supreme, balance, sensitivity, etc.⁴⁸⁷

The relational power of a work of art is often condensed in the titular power: titles can, as a matter of fact, well define what something represents or what something does not represent. The feature of indeterminacy is well noted by the art historian Thomas B. Hess that wrote

Logically, this is a shaky situation, because ideas develop in reference and in range during the execution of each painting, which is one reason, perhaps, why so many of de Kooning's works are, according to the artist, "unfinished" or unrealized. De Kooning's is a slippery universe made of expanding numbers of indications and changing points of view—a finished painting is turned upside-down at the last moment, an eye becomes a tack, a thumb becomes a mountain. Man, traditionally the measure of all things and whom all things measure, goes around systematically breaking every platinum yardstick he can get his hands on. Nothing seems constant.⁴⁸⁸

According to Hess "multiplicity becomes a premise. The clarity is that of ambiguity"⁴⁸⁹. His untitled works open up a series of proliferating meanings in which the use of a word as a title, whatever word might be, would have a nihilistic dimension, negating all the possible realities

⁴⁸⁷ Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me", quot., p. 266.

⁴⁸⁸ Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, quot., p. 14.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

embedded in the work, “each invented shape changes in a new context but it never sloughs off any of its old signification”⁴⁹⁰.

In the 1980s he used the title *Untitled* followed by a number, so it is possible to document the presence of *Untitled VII*, 1981; *Untitled I*, 1981; *Untitled IX*, 1975 among other works.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 15.

3. Reductionist Practices: Strategies of the Untitled title in Minimalism

This chapter aims to analyse the title Untitled in Minimalism: it is possible to record a drift towards a radical abstraction, and towards the literalism, with reductionist ambitions intertwined with the interest in industrialization processes, especially for what concerns the kind of materials used. The display at the Venice Biennale of 1968 of the The Black Square (1913) by Malevic well describes “the principle of autoreferentiality of the work object, and [...] the conceptual implications deriving from the reduction of the work to the primariness of the compositional elements”⁴⁹¹. In the 1960s it is possible to record

[...] the loss of the referentiality of the artistic object. The reduction of the form to its radical and volumetric simplicity avoids the emergence of metaphor and the translation of reality into mimetic forms. On the other hand, by presenting itself tautologically independent, the art object proposes itself to fruition in a ‘literal’ way according to its ‘autotelic’ and ‘self-referencing’ nature.⁴⁹²

The works’ tautological dimension is particularly significant: many titles, indeed, consist of literal description of what the work looks like or is made of, apparently not adding other information to the process of fruition of the piece.

As seen in the second chapter the reasons of artists affiliated with Abstract Expressionism concerning the choice of titles did vary significantly. In a similar way the titling practices of artists that were in various occasions related

⁴⁹¹ Luisa Giacobbe, “Minimalismo americano e arte italiana delle ‘Nuove Strutture’ alla XXXIV Biennale d’arte di Venezia”, in *Ricerche di Storia dell’arte*, No. 98, 2009, p. 24, my translation.

⁴⁹² *Ibidem*, my translation.

to Minimalism or presented with exhibitions of Minimalism, such as Agnes Martin (1912 - 2004), Donald Judd (1928 - 1994), Robert Ryman (1930 - 2019), Robert Morris (1931 - 2018), Dan Flavin (1933 - 1996), have different components. The position of Agnes Martin is particularly fascinating: although she declared, on various occasions, her closeness to Abstract Expressionism⁴⁹³, her work has mostly been shown in relation to Minimalist artists.

The chapter is structured as follows: firstly, there is an introduction about the complexities of Minimalism regarding its definitions, then followed by an analysis of its most significant voices (Agnes Martin, Donald Judd, Robert Ryman and Robert Morris) focusing on the titling of the works. More attention is given to their writings: the *Untitled* has become, during the 1960s, an apparently accepted term and it has not found a particular critical reception in art criticism. Due to the growing number of exchanges on an international level, a chronological analysis of the exhibitions is less effective.

⁴⁹³ Therefore, the analysis of her work should be situated in the second chapter, however it is inserted here as it is functional to the more general reflections on the decade.

3.1. The Untitled title in Minimalism

Various art historians have questioned the unity of Minimalism, highlighting that it was not coherent, but a field of very different practices. Also the name itself of the movement did vary: *Minimal Art*⁴⁹⁴, *ABC Art*⁴⁹⁵, *Primary Structures*, *Rejective Art*, *Cool Art* among others, all of these terms attempting to define peculiar aspects. Although the term is widely used today “all of the artists identified with Minimalism distanced themselves from this label [...] because it implied a stylistic

⁴⁹⁴ The term *Minimal Art* was first applied by Richard Wollheim in his essay “Minimal Art”, published in *Arts Magazine*, January 1965, pp. 26-32 and reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art*, University of California, 1995, pp. 387-9. The term Minimal was already in use, as James Meyer has demonstrated (in *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, Yale University, 2001) in the years immediately before by Sam Wagstaff and Donald Judd, so 1963-4. The list of titled used to refer to Minimalism is extremely dense: “In art, the question of whom to include under the Minimalist rubric was from the beginning no more problematic than whether to use the rubric at all [...] early attempts to characterize the painting and/or sculpture included “ABC art” (Barbara Rose), “reductive art” (Rose, after Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried), “literalist art” (Fried, after Robert Morris), “rejective art” (Lucy Lippard), “neomechanist school” (Robert Coates), “structurist” sculpture (Lippard), “Abstract Mannerism” (Peter Hutchinson), “rationalized” art” (James Mellow), “cool art” (Irving Sandler), “one-shot art” (Sandler), “miniarts” (Douglas Davis), “object sculpture” (Rose), “sculptecture” or “post-painterly relief” (Anne Hoene), “primary structures” (Kynaston McShine’s title for the spring 1966 exhibition he curated at the Jewish Museum), “systemic painting” (Lawrence Alloway’s title for the fall 1966 exhibition he curated at the Guggenheim Museum), “one-image painting” (Alloway), “specific objects” (Donald Judd), “unitary forms” (Robert Morris used as the title of the 1970 San Francisco Museum of Art show curated by Suzanne Foley), and “unitary objects” (the Morris/Judd portmanteau phrase used by Sandler in the catalogue essay for the 1967 exhibition *American Sculpture of the Sixties* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art).” From Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, quot., 2000, p. 17.

⁴⁹⁵ Barbara Rose, “ABC Art”, in *Art in America*, October/November 1965, reprinted in Battcock, *Minimal Art*, quot., pp. 274-297.

and theoretical coherence⁴⁹⁶ that was not shared: the term “minimalism was a shifting signifier shoe meaning altered depending on the moment or context of its use⁴⁹⁷. Kirk Varnedoe noted how minimalist artists “did not like the name at all⁴⁹⁸. Thomas McEvelley highlighted how “there are so many contradictions within it⁴⁹⁹, and how a general analysis of the movement presents insidious pitfalls. This term, in fact, aimed to collect and also simplify extremely different practices. Significant is the fact that in 1970 the identity of Minimalism was discussed:

MINIMAL ART [sic] one of the most important critical terms of the 1960's, also remains one of the vaguest and most controversial. It has been used, alternately, to describe practically any contemporary painting or sculpture that is neat and geometric, and to categorize one or another charmed circle of artists presumed to share one or another aesthetic ideology. The very word ‘minimal’, lending itself at once to insult (implying paucity and in-significance) and to arcane philosophizing (evoking some metaphysical ‘essence’), has been bandied about in so many ways to so many polemical ends that its meaning in relation to art is by now approximately nil.⁵⁰⁰

Despite these complexities the term *Minimalism* was used to define certain artistic developments undertaken by the artists in the 1960s and 1970s, but it did not provide a unequivocal entry point of approach; it was clear to some critics that interpretation of the works would have

⁴⁹⁶ James Meyer, *Minimalism*, quot., p. 30.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 3.

⁴⁹⁸ Kirk Varnedoe, *Abstract Art, Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot., p. 95.

⁴⁹⁹ Thomas McEvelley, “Grey Geese Descending”: The Art Of Agnes Martin. Lines Of Feeling”, in *Artforum*, Summer 1987, Vol. 25, No. 10. p. 95.

⁵⁰⁰ Peter Schjeldahl, “Andre: High Priest of Minimal Art”, in *The New York Times*, October 18, 1970.

become a complicated process: "I prefer to confine myself mostly to describing the new sensibility rather than attempting to interpret an art that, by the term of its own definition, resists interpretation"⁵⁰¹. As well described by Edward Strickland, "Minimalism itself remains both a stylistic and chronological abstraction"⁵⁰². According to Strickland, it is also problematic to clearly define the timeframe of this movement, as some works that could be described as minimal existed in the 1950s (considering for example the work of Ad Reinhardt, a ferryman in between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism), and could be documented in the 1970s and even in the 1980s. Indeed, Reinhardt's practice could not be related to the romantic dimension of Expressionism, neither with the strict and reductive extent of Minimalism. The clear delimitation of its time period depends on which factors are considered, as for example the exhibiting of the first works adherent to Minimalism, or the denomination of the critics, the theorization presented by the artists, or their critical receptions. The unity of the movement has been discussed:

by 1970 the Minimalist movement generally was in disarray, fragmented by arcane schisms and surpassed in novelty by numerous more outlandish, if less robust, off-shoot mini-movements. It became (and remains) difficult in the midst of so many stylistic currents (each with its critical apologists) to say what was 'Minimal' and what wasn't, and only in the case of certain almost dadaistically reductive works by artists like Carl Andre, Sol Lewitt and Dan Flavin could one feel on safe ground. In the hairsplitting art journal polemics of the

⁵⁰¹ Barbara Rose, *ABC Art*, quot., p. 275.

⁵⁰² Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, quot., p. 4.

time, categories proliferated like factions at an anarchists' convention.⁵⁰³

Certain works created by Abstract Expressionists could be considered, as mentioned, Minimal: for example, some pieces of Stella, Kelly and Reinhardt have been described as “adumbrating developments”⁵⁰⁴ of Minimalism. The frequent use of the title Untitled in the decades 1950s and 1960s, in fact, added another layer of intricacy, seriously aggravating the approach to these works of art, which were “severely reductive”⁵⁰⁵. Francis Colpitt⁵⁰⁶ situated the beginning of Minimalism with the exhibition *Sixteen Americans*⁵⁰⁷ in 1959, and the display of Stella’s *Black Paintings*, and its end with Morris’ process oriented works as well as Michael Heizer earthworks in the late 1960s. Eventually the term Minimal comprised art with “geometry emphasized and expressive techniques avoided”⁵⁰⁸, but the exact definition of its time limit still constitutes a subject of discussion, the term is nowadays used to describe a reductionist approach, and it is not necessarily related only to artistic and art historical matters. Also among artists themselves it is possible to document some scepticism, Donald Judd, when asked what he thought about the term Minimal applied to his works, replied: “Well, I don’t like it. What’s minimal about it?”⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰³ Peter Schjeldahl, “If Not Timeless, It’s At Least Open-Ended”, in *The New York Times*, January 23, 1972.

⁵⁰⁴ Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, quot., p. 5.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ivi*, p. 4.

⁵⁰⁶ Frances Colpitt, *The Minimal Art: A Critical Perspective*, University of Washington, 1990, no page number.

⁵⁰⁷ *Sixteen Americans*, New York, MoMA, Dec. 16, 1959 - Feb. 17, 1960.

⁵⁰⁸ Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, quot., p. 6.

⁵⁰⁹ Interview with Barbara Rose for the film *American Art in the 1960s*, Summer 1972, reprinted in Donald Judd, *Interviews*, Zwirner Books, 2019, p. 401. Judd then highlighted the differences among the works of Robert Morris, Carl Andre and Dan Flavin.

Nevertheless, “despite their objections, minimalism became a canonized movement by the end of the sixties”⁵¹⁰: the term itself was considered a characterizing element, although it contained very different practices, as it will be demonstrated in this chapter.

The decision to use the title *Untitled*, a practice as mentioned quite common in Minimalism, mirrored the more general desire to “purge the work of art of unnecessary [...] variables”⁵¹¹. The artwork was carefully analysed in all its components and the title, as a constituent element, was also questioned by most of the artists. Frank Stella, referring to his works, noted that “there’s not enough there to talk about. [...] That seems to be the thing that bothers them [the critics] the most”⁵¹². Art criticism and the public were heavily challenged by the exclusion of references: a shift towards the catharsis of the artwork, and its reduction to its basic components.

Sol LeWitt wrote that “much has been written about minimal art, but I have not discovered anyone who admits to doing this kind of thing”⁵¹³, referring to the distance between the readings offered by critics and the artists themselves. Similarly, Carl Andre characterized the term Minimal and labels as marketing terms, which had little to do with the work: “Beware of being seduced by terms of consumption. Just forget ‘ABC’, ‘Minimal’, etc.”⁵¹⁴. Artists felt threatened by the various attempts to define and confine, within categories, their works.

⁵¹⁰ James Meyer, *Minimalism*, quot., p. 30.

⁵¹¹ James Meyer, *Minimalism*, quot., p. 80.

⁵¹² Frank Stella, lecture delivered at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY, January - February 1960, quot. in James Meyer, *Minimalism*, note. 34, p. 284.

⁵¹³ Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, in *Artforum*, June 1967, Vol. 5, No. 10, pp. 166-7.

⁵¹⁴ “Letter to James Meyer”, October 1, 1991, cited in James Meyer, *Minimalism*, quot., p. 284.

Minimalism has been subjected also to political readings, such as the one of Anna C. Chave⁵¹⁵ that saw the “silence” of the pieces as a critique towards mass and industrial production, as well as depersonalization, embodied by the works themselves, a non-titled, silent criticism towards the changing society of the 1960s. Mechanization and de-humanization being vehicles of this expression, a sort of silent protest. This political connotation will be evident also in the definition of Arte Povera, in its link with the student movements of 1968 and more in general with a climate of protests and social turmoil, which was even evident during the XXXIV Biennale of Venice. The withdrawal of the works and the desertion of many artists, as for example of Michelangelo Pistoletto, could be situated in this revolutionary climate. In 1972, the XXXVI Venice Biennale Italian pavilion was titled *Work or Behavior*, posing the emphasis on the social dynamics constituent of the artistic experience. In particular Lea Vergine’s text, “Attraverso l’arte: pratica politica-pagare il ’68”⁵¹⁶, well describes the artists’ interest in the social, political dimension. Pop Art, also in this decade, and in particular with the mentioned Biennale, focused on the phenomena of production and hyper consumption of images.

Language in Minimalism constitutes a significant point of analysis: W.J.T. Mitchell highlighted that “the relation of art and language, object and label, is one of the principal paradoxes of minimalist sculpture”⁵¹⁷. Minimalist works, often being Untitled are hard

⁵¹⁵ Anna C. Chave, “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power”, in *Arts Magazine*, January 1990, Vol. 64, No. 5, p. 44.

⁵¹⁶ Lea Vergine, *Attraverso l’arte: pratica politica-pagare il ’68*, Arcana, Roma, 1976.

⁵¹⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Word and Image and Object: Wall labels for Robert Morris”, in *Pictures Theory: Essay on Verbal and Visual Representation*, University of Chicago, 1994, p. 246. This text was published in the catalogue of Morris’s 1993 Guggenheim retrospective. Mitchell’s texts are informed by a dream diary entry that Morris sent to Mitchell, after having had nightmares around labels, all quoted in the above mentioned

to relate to, they invite the viewer to face the question: “what can we say about them?”⁵¹⁸. The silence induced by the lack of titles was considered as a form of “perpetrated violence [...] - violence against the conventions of art and against the viewer”⁵¹⁹. Conventions that, as seen in the first chapter, included the title being a constituent part of the work of art, definitely in the XX century.

An analysis on the criticalities of language in art was evident in the broader context, it is, in fact, in 1950 that John Cage performed his “Lecture on nothing” at the Artist’s Club in Manhattan, then included in his collection of writings, *Silence*, published in 1951: “I have nothing to say and that is the point of me saying it”⁵²⁰ adding that “words are only noises”⁵²¹ and that “it’s a waste of time to trouble oneself with words”⁵²². In April 1958, at Iris Clert, Yves Klein showed *The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility, The Void*, with the removal of everything from the gallery up to the point of reaching the Void. In 1960 the *Manifesto contro niente per l’esposizione internazionale di niente* (Manifesto against nothing for the international exhibition of nothing) was signed in Basel by Carl Laszlo, Onorio, Rolf Fenkart, Bazon Brock, Herbert Schuldt, Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani, Heinz Mack, Otto Piene. Cage’s explorations were analogous, as Lucy Lippard highlighted, “to Stephane Mallarme’s when he proposed to reject symbolic interpretation

text, pp. 241-279. Mitchell’s expressed some perplexity towards the directness of these entries: “I’m very sceptical about the authority of this dream. It strikes me as flagrantly literary, [...] It is the sort of dream one makes up (perhaps unconsciously) for one’s analyst”.

⁵¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 247.

⁵¹⁹ Anna C. Chave, “*Minimalism*”, quot., p. 54.

⁵²⁰ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Wesleyan University, 1961, p. 51.

⁵²¹ *Ivi*, p. 135.

⁵²² *Ivi*, p. 104.

of poetry and to leave nothing, but the white page, which would be 'evocative of all because it contained nothing.'⁵²³. The 1950s and 1960s were definitely a moment of discussion of the relationship image – word. The title Untitled emerged in a period when “the title has beaten the work into a form of submission to its materials (text), its placement (context, whether social or institutional), and its system of allusion (a new “philosophy of art”)⁵²⁴, in particular “the whole situation of minimalism seems designed to defeat the notion of the ‘readable’ work of art, understood intelligible allegory, an expressive symbol, or coherent as a narrative”⁵²⁵. It is, in fact, very hard, except a few cases that will be analysed, to find allusions to anything external to the work of art: there are no metaphors, no metonyms, no symbols, no allegories, no anecdotes or narrations.

These reflections are situated within a redefinition of the relationship art and language, that was central in the decade of the 1960s: “whatever art is, it is, and criticism, which is language, is something different. Language comes to terms with art by creating parallel structures or transposing, both of which are less than adequate”⁵²⁶. Extremely interesting are the quotations in the beginning of the text by Bochner: by Husserl (“Go to the things themselves”) and by Hume (“No object implies the existence of another”) and by A.J. Ayer, that perfectly mirrors Judd’s review of the 1964 show titled *Black, White and Gray*, which will be quoted in the following paragraphs: “There is nothing more to things

⁵²³ Lucy Lippard, “The silent Art”, in *Art in America*, 1967, p. 61.

⁵²⁴ John C. Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, quot., p. 328.

⁵²⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Word and Image and Object: Wall labels for Robert Morris”, in *Pictures Theory: Essay on Verbal and Visual Representation*, quot, p. 246-247.

⁵²⁶ Mel Bochner, “Serial Art, Systems, Solypsism”, in *Arts Magazine*, 1967, reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art*, quot., pp. 92-102.

than what can be discovered by listing the totality of the descriptions which they satisfy"⁵²⁷.

In 1966 Susan Sontag published her book *Against Interpretation*⁵²⁸, a text in which she addressed many issues regarding the fruition of a work of art, in a period characterized by "the odd vision by which something we have learned to call 'form' is separated off from something we have learned to call 'content'"⁵²⁹. According to her "reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable"⁵³⁰. Her text is particularly significant as it deals on the fundamental aspect of experience of an artwork. As an example to better understand her position, it is possible to mention the raise of interpretation of Jackson Pollock's paintings through his titles in the 1960s, mentioned in the previous chapter: art historians were often searching for allusions, if not meanings, in his artworks. Sontag was not appealing to a formalist reading, rather an analysis of the work and a reading of the "coding" of the works, which required its contextualization. The choice of the Untitled title in this period can therefore be considered as a strong opposition towards the growing demand of readability of artworks: "the idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism"⁵³¹.

The title Untitled frequently used by artists ascribed to Minimalism challenged the public, forced it to deal with artworks that

⁵²⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵²⁸ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Ferrar, 1966. The text was originally published in 1964.

⁵²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 14.

⁵³⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵³¹ *Ivi*, p. 15.

are “hermetically closed”⁵³²; it removed the possibility of providing interpretations through words. But the title Untitled also allowed the works to be subjective to interpretation, as they “can be all things to all men while remaining totally unchanged”⁵³³. It is therefore possible to register a swing between the two dimensions: on the one side this term denies the transparent readability of a content, advocating for the confrontation with the purely material consistency of the piece; on the other, it requires an extended literary interpretation, as if the piece was mute and needed verbal contributions in order to be fully experienced. A fluctuation that contributed to a significant debate around the nature of an artwork: does the visual dimension exist independently, which would mean that it exists also outside of language, or is it a language itself, with its ambition of communicating, although in a not direct and not unambiguous way?⁵³⁴

Albeit the apparent request for silence the title Untitled provokes, it should be considered that “no art has ever been more dependent on words than these works pledged to silent materiality... The less there is to see, the more there is to say”⁵³⁵. As Hilton Kramer has noted: “it is a fact that art has become increasingly dependent upon criticism and aesthetic theory, not only for its audience but for the whole conceptual framework on which it is based”⁵³⁶, this is particularly true for what concerns Minimalism. The artistic situation of the 1960s

⁵³² Hal Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism”, in *The return of the real: the avant-garde at the end of the century*, MIT, 1996, p. 36.

⁵³³ Brian O’Doherty, “Minus Plato”, 1966, reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art*, quot., p. 252.

⁵³⁴ This debate has been central in the first chapter.

⁵³⁵ Harold Rosenberg, “Defining Art,” in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art*, quot., p. 306.

⁵³⁶ Hilton Kramer, “An Art of Boredom?” in *The New York Times*, June 6, 1966, p. 23.

presented a drift towards dematerialization⁵³⁷ and ephemerality, in fact the marketing of artworks was also threatened. This tendency can be situated within a critique against the art as a commodity, which took place in the same years⁵³⁸.

The silence the pieces come with is confronted by a growing textual dimension (in terms of artist declarations, interviews, publications, radio interviews, reviews, catalogue essays among others, all elements that increased the artist exposure), which was extremely relevant for what concerns the theoretical framework of Minimalism, as to set the grounds for the birth of purely conceptual practices, that also developed in this decade, as well analysed by Lucy Lippard. In particular three texts were discussed and frequently referenced by the artists and critics of the period: “Specific Objects” by Donald Judd (1965), “Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 and 2” by Robert Morris (1966), and “Art and Objecthood” by Michael Fried (1967). These texts “manifest both the claims and the contradictions of minimalism”⁵³⁹. An in-depth analysis of the three texts, for what concerns the titling practices, will be carried in reference to the authors that published them.

⁵³⁷ Fundamental is the text by Lucy Lippard *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* from 1966 to 1972, published in 1973. In the same book she wrote: “Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or 'dematerialized”.

⁵³⁸ “They had turned to process art, earth art, installation art, body art, and conceptual art because they did not want to create art commodities. Many also believed, as Lucy Lippard observed, that their refusal to produce saleable objects would subvert the art market (although she later acknowledged that this attempt had failed). [...] As Nancy Foote wrote: “It’s ironic that an art whose generating impulse was the urge to break away from the collectible object (and hence the gallery / collector / artbook syndrome) might through an obsession with the extent and quality of its documentation, have come full circle”, Irving Sandler, *Art of the Post Modern Era. From the late 1960s to the Early 1990s*, Westview, 2014, p. 24.

⁵³⁹ Hal Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism”, *quot.*, p. 44. Judd always expressed a strong criticism towards the texts of Michael Fried and Barbara Rose.

Various artists expressed a certain resistance towards contemporary art criticism and verbalization of artistic processes, as for example also Meyer highlighted: “LeWitt was hardly alone in dismissing the ‘secret language’ of critics. Flavin and Judd also expressed a general suspicion of accounts of their work”⁵⁴⁰. Art critics were confronted with an art characterized by “visual simplicity and utter lack of expressive or symbolic elaboration”⁵⁴¹, in fact, “the more minimal the art, the more maximum the explanation”⁵⁴² it required. And although artists made us of a “garrulous and ingenious theorizing [...], intellectual complexity and profound philosophic involvement”⁵⁴³ critics remained often quite puzzled in front of the works, as they did not offer any suggested relations. Hilton Kramer⁵⁴⁴ mocked the movement describing how the connoisseurship of Wittgenstein, McLuhan, Merleau Ponty and Panofsky among others was necessary to approach those works, otherwise impossible to be experienced.

What is extremely important is to highlight how the art public in the 1960s lived a significant expansion, as the Stanford Research Institute Report of 1962, entitled *Art and Business*, demonstrated⁵⁴⁵, moreover the “glossy fashion magazine provided an effective means of circumventing the gallery system and achieving a mass distribution”⁵⁴⁶. The public exposure of the artists ascribed to the movement was similar to the one the artists of Pop arts had:

⁵⁴⁰ James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics*, quot., p. 6.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴⁴ Hilton Kramer, “An Art of Boredom?”, *quot.*, p. 23.

⁵⁴⁵ Reported by Meyer, *quot.*, p. 28.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 29.

In this respect Judd was not so removed from 'Andy', master the game, as he believed.' A sharp critic of Warhol's blurring of fine art and advertising, Judd did not reject publicity when he himself was the beneficiary. He may have looked uncomfortable, but the attention didn't hurt.⁵⁴⁷

During the 1960s art criticism gained more importance, as mentioned, in particular also due to the participation of the artist in academic and critical discourses⁵⁴⁸ (among them Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Mel Bochner have been quite prolific), and due to a major focus on concepts that informed the artworks, a dimension that has been defined as *accelerated textuality*⁵⁴⁹. The 1960s were crucial for what concerns the progressive shift towards the "final eclipse of the visual object and substitutions by 'concepts'"⁵⁵⁰, which lead to the development of Conceptual Art and the theorization of the *linguistic turn*⁵⁵¹ by Richard Rorty in 1967.

Some of the artists felt "forced" to be more prolific in terms of writing, as in the case of Le Witt for example, he had to "counterbalance the general critical incompetence. He specifically objected the catchy labels

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴⁸ Donald Judd for example worked consistently as art critic, writing reviews for *Arts* magazine from 1959-65.

⁵⁴⁹ John Welchman, *Invisible colors*, quot.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 324.

⁵⁵¹ The shift towards language in this period is also reflected in Conceptual art, described as "Caption Art" by Richard Milazzo, in a private conversation with the author, February 8, 2021. He added: "We can see how disastrous the linguistic turn was in the Conceptual Art of the 1960s, how it turned the content of art in what I call Caption Art – meaning you might not know what the work is about unless you read the caption, or the meaning of the work is over-dependent upon the information in the caption – into a very elite, over-intellectualized proposition suitable for only a few (with an academic bent of mind), stripped of all but the most schematic visual parameters. Caption Art is held captive almost exclusively by information".

used to describe their work”⁵⁵², as “Minimalism seems designed to defeat the notion of the ‘readable’ work of art”⁵⁵³. But the “readability” of the works represented a quite substantial issue, as witnessed in the magazine *Art Voices*:

We have, indeed, come across virgin surfaces [laughter], reduced to the utmost simplicity, in fact to almost nothing [...] We believe something ought to be done about it, soon, and by all concerned.⁵⁵⁴

How did the Untitled title contribute to the shaping of this dimension of “un-readability” of the artworks is at the very core of this chapter.

More than the exhibition history, the writings of the artists and their reception among critics can shed significant light on the various use and implications, *nuances* of the title Untitled. Many critics were frequently writing on the new movement in a rather biting way, others supporting the Minimalist research, as in the case of Barbara Rose, Lucy Lippard, Mel Bochner among others. The first group of critics highlighted the non-relational structures:

[according to] Greenberg, Fried, and Rubin modern art has an innate tendency to pull away from any literal reference to thin outside itself and to refer only to the essential properties of painting per se: flatness, line, and color.⁵⁵⁵

Also many artists suggested that the experience of artworks should be based on their physical presence, it is rightly in this decade that the white

⁵⁵² James Meyer, *Minimalism*, quot., p. 6.

⁵⁵³ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Word and Image and Object*, quot., p. 247.

⁵⁵⁴ St. Evremond, editorial, *Art Voices*, January 1964, p. 3.

⁵⁵⁵ Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot., p. 97.

cube fully finds its expression. Greenberg wrote that “the literalness that was once its handicap has now become its advantage”⁵⁵⁶, describing how the aim of the works was to “render substance entirely optical”⁵⁵⁷.

Anyhow, Lawrence Alloway highlighted how the formalist approach could not be sufficient: “what is missing from the formalist approach to painting is a serious desire to study meanings beyond the purely visual configuration”⁵⁵⁸. It is possible to register a tension between the very physical presence of the works and all their non-material, verbalized, implications. It is evident that in the 1960s art criticism was facing also linguistic issues and other challenges, to which critics responded with different strategies, as highlighted by Annette Michelson:

1. A general and immediate proliferation of new epithets.
2. Attempts to find historical, formal precedents, which might facilitate analysis.
3. A growing literature about the problematic nature of available critical vocabulary, procedure, standards.

Artists responded with:

1. A growing personal concern and active involvement with critical practice.
2. Serious attempts to re-define the limits of criticism.
3. A correlative attempt to reform critical language and descriptive terms.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁶ Clement Greenberg, “The New Sculpture”, published originally in 1948 and reprinted in 1958, included in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture, Critical Essays*, Beacon Press, 1965, p. 143.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 145.

⁵⁵⁸ Lawrence Alloway, *Systemic Painting*, exh. cat., New York, Guggenheim Museum, 1966, p. 16.

⁵⁵⁹ Annette Michelson, “Robert Morris. An Aesthetics of Transgression”, in *Robert Morris*, Corcoran Gallery 1969, p. 13.

The above-described actions, undertaken by the artists, were fed by the “stylistics of negation”⁵⁶⁰: the title *Untitled* is definitely situated in this arena of challenges.

In her essay of 1965, titled *ABC Art*, Barbara Rose highlighted how the artists “make their art as difficult, remote, aloof and indigestible as possible”⁵⁶¹ and proceed towards the “elimination of the narrative element”⁵⁶². Her subtitles in the text are quite meaningful: “art as a demonstration: the factual, the concrete, the self-evident”⁵⁶³, therefore requiring a merely physical, concrete, sensorial approach. Barbara Rose, according to Kirk Varnedoe, “attempted to make sense of the then-unnamed art and to respond to its elemental quality”⁵⁶⁴: the *Untitled* title denied any external references. In her text Rose quoted a paragraph from *The Philosophical Investigations* of Wittgenstein, that according to her, was familiar to many of the artists of *ABC Art*. It is particularly illuminating for what concerns the practice of naming the works.

But what does it mean to say that we cannot define (that is, describe) these elements, but only name them? This might mean, for instance, that when in a limiting case a complex consists of only one square, its description is simply the name of the coloured square.⁵⁶⁵

This reading could support the growing tautological titles that would also be shared by artists belonging to *Arte povera*. She, then, added that

⁵⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p. 15.

⁵⁶¹ Barbara Rose, “ABC Art”, quot., p. 66.

⁵⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶⁴ Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot., p. 96.

⁵⁶⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, 1953, quoted in B. Rose, *ABC Art*, p. 55.

“the art I have been talking about is obviously a negative art of denial and renunciation”⁵⁶⁶: a pendulum between silent and tautological titles. It is possible to think that most of the titles used by Minimalist artists could be considered as Untitled titles, as they merely describe what the object are, as for examples the many “beams”, “boxes”, “cubes” present: works that could not be described, rather simply named, in a tautological, if not redundant way. In a way these works functioned without involving an intellectual aspect:

The process of ‘algebrization’, the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature-a number, for example-or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition.⁵⁶⁷

Rose added that “Judd’s and Morris’s sculptures often look like illustrations of that philosopher’s [Wittgenstein] propositions”⁵⁶⁸, supporting an approach that eliminated more complex relational readings, rather focusing on the pure visuality of the elements. Her description, in fact, matched the fact that imaginary titles are very rarely present. The art of Minimalism is “obviously a negative art of denial and renunciation”⁵⁶⁹, “such protracted asceticism is normally the activity of contemplative or mystics [...] the blankness, the emptiness and vacuum of content is as easily construed as an occasion for spiritual contemplation as it is a nihilistic denial of the world”⁵⁷⁰. The Untitled title also stemmed out as a negation of further readings. But, according to

⁵⁶⁶ Barbara Rose, *ABC Art*, quot., p. 67.

⁵⁶⁷ Victor Shklovsky "Art as Technique", in Rosalind Krauss, "LeWitt in progress", in *October*, No. 6, 1978, p. 48.

⁵⁶⁸ B. Rose, *quot*, p. 66.

⁵⁶⁹ B. Rose, *quot*, p. 69.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

Battcock “Minimal art is not a negation of a past art, or a nihilistic gesture. Indeed, it must be understood that by not doing something one can instead make a fully affirmative gesture”⁵⁷¹. Kirk Varnedoe, in his publication *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, highlighted the desire of the artists to have no reference⁵⁷², and their realization “that abstraction is most successful and effective when association and meaning appear out of reach”⁵⁷³. Minimalist artists were “seeking to evoke, it would seem, that semi-hypnotic state of blank consciousness, of meaningless tranquillity and anonymity [...] awkward, uncompromising, sometimes brutal directness”⁵⁷⁴, indeed, “the spectator is not given symbols but facts”⁵⁷⁵. Minimalism emerged also as a contrast towards the recent “romantic mentality, which fails to appreciate experience for its own intrinsic value and is forever trying to elevate it by complications and associations”⁵⁷⁶. This position was probably a backlash against what Abstract Expressionists, at least in the early 1940s, were aiming to, as for example the mythological titles, as in the case of Jackson Pollock (as demonstrated often not his titles), and of the early works of Mark Rothko, dense of allusions and allegories.

Looking at certain exhibitions of Minimalism helps in understanding how the framing of the movement came into being. A landmark exhibition, *Black, White and Gray* (January 9 - February 9, 1964, Wadsworth Athenaeum) was central in the development of Minimalism.

⁵⁷¹ Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: a critical anthology*, quot., p. 28.

⁵⁷² Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot., p. 31.

⁵⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷⁴ Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: a critical anthology*, quot., p. 28.

⁵⁷⁵ Eugene Goossen, *The Art of the Real: U.S.A. 1948 - 1969*, exh. cat., Jul 3-Sep 8, 1968, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1968, p. 11.

⁵⁷⁶ Eugene Goosen, “Eight Young Artists”, reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art*, quot., p. 167.

Fundamental is a review by Donald Judd himself, who clearly described the works featured in the show:

The boxes on the floor are by Robert Morris, Tony Smith, Anne Truitt and James Byars. Morris' Portal and an untitled piece, an open square, both about a foot by a foot all around, were shown at Gordon's; Column and Slab were shown at Green. They are all painted light gray, are large and are only rectangular. These and Rauschenberg's early white painting, made of four panels, are the extreme of the most inclusive attitude of the show. They are next to nothing; you wonder why anyone would build something only barely present. There isn't anything to look at. Rauschenberg said of one of his white paintings, 'If you don't take it seriously, there is nothing to take.' Morris' pieces exist after all, as meager as they are. Things that exist exist, and everything is on their side. They're here, which is pretty puzzling. Nothing can be said of things that don't exist. Things exist in the same way if that is all that is which may be because we considered feel that or because that is what the word means or both. Everything is equal, just existing, and the values and interests they have only adventitious.⁵⁷⁷

Some of the traits that emerge in Judd's analysis can be considered consistent in Minimalism: the presence of Untitled works, and their being perceived as "next to nothing". According to the artist, Morris' work was "useless and unidentifiable"⁵⁷⁸; it did not provide the viewers with any clues for interpretation.

⁵⁷⁷ Donald Judd, "Nationwide Reports: Hartford", in *Arts Magazine*, March 1964, reprinted in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959 - 1975, Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statement, Complaints*, Judd Foundation, 1975, reprinted in 2005, p. 117.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

Some resistance towards the indecipherability of the works was very common in the 1960s and in particular due to the lack of hints the artists provided. Lucy Lippard, in a text focused on the “10 x 10” exhibition at the Dwan Gallery, wrote:

The exclusion of ‘lyricism, humanity, and warmth of expression’ horrifies Mr. Rosenberg (writing in *Vogue*). Yet do we really turn to painting and sculpture for any of these qualities? Is there any reason why the rarefied atmosphere of aesthetic pleasure should be obscured by everyday emotional and associative obsessions, by definite pasts, presents and futures, by “human” experience? Humanist content and the need for humanist content in the visual arts in this century is rapidly diminishing; at the moment it rests with photography, film, and the stagnation of figurative art. A painting that is asked to be both a painting and a picture of something else that has nothing to do with painting per se is likely to suffer from its contradictory roles. Visual art is visual. Abstract art objects are made to be seen and not heard, touched, read, entered, interpreted. The expansion of the visual media into other areas has produced many effective results, but they have increasingly less to do with visual art and more to do with a new art of fusion. Thus the issue of introducing ‘other experience’ into art is, in the context of rejective styles, and for better or for worse, irrelevant. Literature, as a verbal medium, demands a verbal response. But advanced music has not been asked to explain itself symbolically or humanistically for years. Why should painting and sculpture still be scapegoats?⁵⁷⁹

Lippard’s writings seemed very close to the text of Susan Sontag quoted above, imagining an experience of the spectator that would not need

⁵⁷⁹ Lucy Lippard, “After a fashion – a group show”, in *The Hudson Review*, Volume XIX, Winter 66-67, 1966, no page number.

further explanations, rather preferring a sensorial approach. She supported the movement and emphasized the characteristics that made the visual experience entirely visual and not reliant on written languages: similarly, to how music is experienced. Indeed, "the demand has been for an honest, direct, unadulterated experience in art...minus symbolism, minus messages and minus personal exhibitionism"⁵⁸⁰. The desire of reaching a more unmediated and direct language was common among the artists, they mostly did not contribute with suggestive titles:

On the one hand, the beholder is confronted by simple, spare, elemental, usually untitled objects that seem deliberately 'inexpressive', 'deadpan', and 'inarticulate'. What can objects labelled 'Slab', 'Beam', and 'Box' say to us? What can we possibly say about them? The labels seem to say it all, to exhaust the object and the visual experience of the object. The whole situation of minimalism seems designed to defeat the notion of the 'readable' work of art, understood intelligible allegory, an expressive symbol, or coherent as a narrative.⁵⁸¹

Allen Leepa noted the problems related to words, when associated with artworks:

Words restrict experiences and ideas [...] We become slaves to the limitations imposed on us by our use of language, at the same time that we organize ourselves in essential ways because of it. Minimal

⁵⁸⁰ Eugene Goossen, "Distillation", 1966, reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art*, quot., p. 169.

⁵⁸¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Word and Image and Object*: quot., pp. 246-247.

Art attempts to avoid this dilemma by a more direct comparison with the essential elements of perception itself.⁵⁸²

The simplicity and directness of the titles utilized were among the crucial features. What is clear is that in Minimalism:

There is no reference to another previous experience (no representation), no implication of a higher level of experience (no and metaphysics), no promise of a deeper intellectual experience (no metaphor). Instead, Minimalism presents the viewer with objects of charged neutrality: objects usually rectilinear, employing one or two materials, one or two colors, repeated identical units, factory-made or store-bought; objects that are without any hierarchy of interest, that directly engage and interact with the particular space they occupy; objects that reveal everything about themselves, but little about the artist; objects whose subject is the viewer. By shifting the emphasis so emphatically to direct experience Minimalist art makes a clear statement about the nature of reality. Its apparent simplicity is a result of rigorous focusing, the elimination of distraction.⁵⁸³

Minimalists claimed independence from the research carried out by Abstract Expressionism, while the movement's influence was clear, particularly in terms of the materiality of the works, which had played a crucial role:

When Judd or Andre looked at Pollock, they did not see pure opticality; they saw house paint poured out of a can, with no mediation. What was thrilling and exciting to them in Pollock's

⁵⁸² Allen Leepa, "Minimal Art and Primary meanings" in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal art*: quot., pp. 200-209.

⁵⁸³ Michael Craig-Martin, "The art of context", in *Minimalism: What you see is what you see*, Tate Gallery Liverpool, exh. cat., Mar 22, 1989 - February 1, 1990, no page number.

paintings were the properties of paint as a material: its relationship to gravity, the way that it hit the canvas; its immediacy and physicality. It had a specific, material quality, without reference or metaphor.⁵⁸⁴

In particular the research of Ad Reinhardt seemed influential, described as “the forerunner and major influence on the younger group of artists who have been described as ‘rejective’, ‘minimal’, ‘systemic’, ‘structural’”⁵⁸⁵. This practice reflected, according to Varnedoe, the “empirical, pragmatic dimension, American insistence on concreteness and fact”⁵⁸⁶. Nevertheless, the identity of *Minimalism* has often been defined in contrast to Abstract Expressionism.

As it will be demonstrated in this chapter, the negation of titles contributed to a very reductive dimension often attributed to Minimalism, which “was so drastically reductive that it appeared utterly nihilistic”⁵⁸⁷, as also the symptomatic title of the program produced by Bruce Glaser indicated: “New Nihilism or New Art?”⁵⁸⁸

The absence of a suggested interpretation in the titles can also be considered one of the features of Minimalism: the lack of anthropomorphic dimension in the works themselves, as well as their seeming industrial elements, emphasizes this detachment. The silence the pieces offered was directed not only towards the critics, but towards a more general audience:

⁵⁸⁴ Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot., p. 99.

⁵⁸⁵ Kynastion McShine, “More than Black”, in *Arts Magazine*, December 1967.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ivi*, p. 102.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ivi*, p. 111.

⁵⁸⁸ This discussion was broadcast on WBAI-FM, New York, February, 1964, and recorded on 15 Feb. 1964, Date Broadcast on WBAI, 24 Mar. 1964 and reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimalism*, quot., pp. 148-165.

Rather than soliciting the viewers' attention, as art objects customarily do, the Minimalist object is perceived as exhibiting a cruel taciturnity and disinterest in the spectator, as its extreme simplicity and dearth of detail act to distance viewers and to repel the close scrutiny they expect to bring to works of arts.⁵⁸⁹

Most importantly the Untitled title also provided the artworks with the right to exist in their own identity:

Rather than inducing idealization and generalization and being allusive, it excludes. The work asserts its own existence, form and power. It becomes an object in its own right.⁵⁹⁰

Rosalind Krauss has highlighted this aspect: “any reference to experiences or ideas beyond the work’s brute physical presence is excluded”⁵⁹¹, giving importance to the “transparency” of the very same objects.

As previously mentioned, many artists in this movement used the Untitled title as a regular practice, but some of the artists, at different times in their careers, also valued titles as essential in the creation of artworks:

although the critics have mostly ignored them, the suggestive titles of many of the objects now regarded as cornerstones of the Minimalist movement prove that the artists themselves were prone to ‘complicating’ their work by ‘associations’.⁵⁹²

⁵⁸⁹ Anna C. Chave, *Minimalism*, quot., p. 55.

⁵⁹⁰ Donald Judd, quot. in Rosalind Krauss, “Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd”, in *Artforum*, May 1966, Vol. 4, No. 9, p. 24.

⁵⁹¹ Rosalind Krauss, *Allusion*, quot., p. 24.

⁵⁹² Anna C. Chave, *Minimalism*, quot., pp. 4-6.

Although the existence of literary titles must be taken into account, any publication focusing on *Minimalism* would most probably denote the presence of a high number of Untitled works.

The following is an in-depth examination of publications and writings connected to the problem of titles, either directly or indirectly. The documentation available for what concerns the titling practices is particularly rich in the work of Agnes Martin (1912 - 2004), Donald Judd (1928 - 1994), Robert Ryman (1930 - 2019), and Robert Morris (1931 - 2018). Also other artists, as for example Sol LeWitt, released many declarations focusing on titles and labels:

‘If I do a wall drawing, I have to have the plan written on the wall or label because it aids the understanding of the idea. If I just had lines on the wall, no one would know that there are ten thousand lines within a certain space, so I have two kinds of form—the lines, and the explanation of the lines. Then there is the idea, which is always unstated.’ The lines are raw phenomena for which the label is not an explanation in the sense of a reason or an interpretation, but an explanation in the sense of a documentary narrative or commentary, like a guide's telling his listener how high this particular redwood is, or how many years it took the Colorado River to cut the Grand Canyon. The label is the document of persistence, of invention dancing over the pit of non- necessity. And then, as LeWitt was fond of saying, ‘there is the idea, which is always unstated’.⁵⁹³

A review by Franco Russoli, titled “Scorie della città [Waste of the city]” published in *Corriere della Sera*, well described the difficulties in approaching the works of Minimalism. The two images presented in the

⁵⁹³ Rosalind Krauss citing LeWitt in “Le Witt in progress”, quot., p. 58.

article are labelled: “an example of ‘antiform’: Richard Serra, ‘Untitled’, pieces of lead piled up” and “Robert Morris, ‘Untitled’, a piece of gray felt”. The article analyses an exhibition in New York, where “the matrix of a moral judgment and democratic participation has been replaced by these forms of Arte povera, an observation without comment and underlining”⁵⁹⁴: these pieces cannot be considered in a Surrealistic dimension: “the moment of the Dada irony or of the extravaganza Pop or of the pop polemic attitude are outdated”⁵⁹⁵.

⁵⁹⁴ Franco Russoli, “Scorie della città”, in *Corriere della Sera*, March 23, 1969.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

3.1.1. Agnes Martin (1912 - 2004)

Agnes Martin's work represents a particularly problematic case, as she often declared her belonging to Abstract Expressionism⁵⁹⁶, although her work was often shown with Minimalist artists, being even defined by Rosalind Krauss "the quintessence of a Minimalist artist"⁵⁹⁷, and by Kim Levin as an "ascetic high priestess of Minimalism"⁵⁹⁸. Although these readings have become more common, this is "a connection she regrets"⁵⁹⁹. Her work has been seen as an ideal prosecution of the investigations initiated by Mondrian, further challenged and enriched by the ruptures initiated by Abstract Expressionism: "by pushing that multiplication as far as it could go and, in addition, repressing the suggestion of any spatial depth, Miss Martin attains an 'annihilation of

⁵⁹⁶ "Abstract Expressionists, of which I consider myself one", Agnes Martin in Arne Glimcher, *Agnes Martin: Paintings, Writings, Remembrances*, Phaidon Press, 2012, p. 23. When asked directly the question of where she would situate her work she said "The Minimalists were non-objective. They just recorded beauty, I guess, without the emotions-or at least without personal emotions. My work is a little more emotional than that". Agnes Martin, "Perfection is in the Mind: an interview with Agnes Martin", interviewed by Joan Simon, in *Art in America* 84, No. 5, May 1996, p. 88. The timeframe also would suggest a closer distance to Abstract Expressionism, Mark Rothko was born in 1903, Barnett Newman in 1905, Agnes Martin and Jackson Pollock in 1912, and Ad Reinhardt in 1913.

⁵⁹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, "The Grid / The Cloud / and the Detail", in *The Presence of Mies*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1994, p. 136.

⁵⁹⁸ Kim Levin, "Agnes Martin's Gridlock", in *The Village Voice*, December 1980, p. 105, cited in Anna C. Chave, "Agnes Martin: 'Humility, The Beautiful Daughter...All of her ways are Empty'" in Barbara Haskell, *Agnes Martin*, exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, H. N. Abrams, 1993, p. 135.

⁵⁹⁹ Holland Cotter, "Like Her Paintings, Quiet, Unchanging and Revered" in *The New York Times*, January 19, 1997, p. 216. This extremely acute article is derived directly from an interview with Agnes Martin; therefore, it is possible to consider these words as almost a direct quotation.

the existence of forms as entities' typical of the sixties"⁶⁰⁰. Her initial pieces, which attracted Betty Parsons' notice, appear to be more concerned in amorphous, organic shapes, comparable to what Rothko and Still were studying. Moreover, Martin did not comply with her theoretical discussions that became a feature of many contemporaries ascribed to Minimalism, artists

whose intellectual pretensions, manifest in their rhetoric and writings about their work, mirrored the (phal)logocentrism of the society", 'it is commonly thought that everything that is can be put into words,' Martin remarked. 'But there is a wide range of emotional response that we make that cannot be put into words.'⁶⁰¹

he avoided any mechanical processes or industrial materials in the techniques she used, preferring hand gestures with all their minor apparent imperfections, allowing for the recognition of the human touch and hand drawn qualities, situating herself away from Minimalism interest in industrialization processes.

It is her profound understanding and delicate use of light that ultimately distinguishes Martin from the Minimalists and even from Abstract Expressionist s like Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Although early on she was attracted to the work of New York School painters, she shrank from the cliché they helped to promote of the chest-thumping, hand-wringing artist. And even though her monochromatic, gridded paintings inevitably linked her with Minimalists like Frank Stella, Donald Judd and Carl Andre, she has always been separated fundamentally from them by the handmade

⁶⁰⁰ Annette Michelson, "Agnes Martin: Recent Paintings", in *Artforum*, Vol. 5, No. 5, January 1967, p. 46.

⁶⁰¹ Anna C. Chave, "Agnes Martin", quot., p. 135.

quality of her work and by her desire to convey emotion and elicit a kind of spiritual response through her art.⁶⁰²

Her independence from these two movements was well noted: “Minimalism and Expressionism have passed into history. Martin’s art remains – quite innocent of that history”⁶⁰³. Eventually it is possible to agree with what Barbara Rose wrote: “It is unfair to an artist determinedly individualistic as Agnes Martin to categorize her art”⁶⁰⁴. Hilton Kramer stated: “the tendency to place her art under the umbrella of Minimalism, though correct as far as it goes (which is about halfway to the truth), violates the actual complexity that is so central to her vision”⁶⁰⁵. Her work is not “designed to be consumed by a busy world”⁶⁰⁶.

Her pieces “were inevitably received as belonging to Minimalist art, and were compared to and exhibited with the works of other artists who had been termed Minimalists. This association was in fact somewhat insensitive to what is going on in Martin’s work”⁶⁰⁷. Her transitional role was noted:

Formally, Martin’s work exhibits many of the same Abstract Expressionist elements that passed into Minimalism – overall composition, repetition, hard edge, and so on – but it emphasizes touch, and, above all, it is saturated with the expression of feeling and

⁶⁰² Michael Kimmelman “Art View: Nature’s Mystical Poetry, Written in Paint” in *The New York Times*, November 15, 1992, p. 220.

⁶⁰³ Richard Shiff, “Agnes Martin: The Nineties and Beyond”, in *Artforum*, April 2002, p. 131.

⁶⁰⁴ Barbara Rose, “The American Woman in Art”, in *Vogue*, June 1973, p. 114.

⁶⁰⁵ Hilton Kramer, “An Intimist of the Grid”, in *The New York Times*, March 18, 1973.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰⁷ Thomas McEvilly, “Grey Geese Descending: The Art Of Agnes Martin. Lines Of Feeling”, in *Artforum*, Vol. 25, No. 10, Summer 1987, p. 95.

emotion that the Minimalists formally abjured. The comparison of Martin's art to Minimalism was rooted in a certain similarity of look, but look alone is an insufficient criterion for such judgments.⁶⁰⁸

Her work cannot be situated only in a transitory moment, as it is deeply unique: it "began to appear at a moment when the tradition of the abstract sublime, while still alive in the canvases of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and others, was on the verge of giving way to Minimalism"⁶⁰⁹.

The Untitled title, in Agnes Martin's work, seemed to accompany a strategy of progressive self-abnegation and reduction, as noted by Douglas Crimp⁶¹⁰. The influence of Ad Reinhardt, with whom she had a great friendship, was significant to this regard:

One of her most succinct and oracular testimonies is 'My paintings have neither objects, nor space, not time, not anything — no forms. They are light, lightness, about merging, about formless-ness breaking down form'. (To compare, Reinhardt wrote: 'Advance toward the formless, what is without contour / Encounter nothingness'.) Martin's adoption of Reinhardt's tactics of negation was strategic.⁶¹¹

Indeed, "Reinhardt's 'negative' and truly rejective approach is paradoxical [...] He avoids effusion by stating only what his art is not; it is not colored, not composed, not inflected, not meaningful in any directly interpretable sense"⁶¹².

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹⁰ Douglas Crimp, "New York Letter", in *Art International*, No. 17, April 1973, p. 57.

⁶¹¹ Suzanne P. Hudson, *Agnes Martin: Night Sea*, Afterall, 2017, first chapter, epub.

⁶¹² Lucy Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, E & P Dutton, 1971, p. 23.

The choice of using the title *Untitled*, in her research, acquired a particular shade, in relation to the immaculateness of her work, whose reference were pureness, blankness, innocence and lucidity⁶¹³, something prior to culture. It is clear, according to Dieter Schwarz, that "all literary allusions or representational references are banished"⁶¹⁴.

Her production, in reference to titles, can be roughly divided in four different phases, for each of them some works will be mentioned. Because the lines are blurred and exceptions exist, this difference cannot be considered exhaustive or applied too strictly. Although in some phases she made use of titles, it is significant to report that her interest was "in experience that is word-less and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed [...] in art work which is also wordless and silent"⁶¹⁵.

The apparent emptiness of her works did not often meet a positive welcoming:

the vandalism that happens, you wouldn't believe how many of my paintings have been destroyed. There are some people that just simply can't take my paintings.... They can't take those empty squares. The rectangles. They don't like emptiness.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹³ William Feaver, "Art: In Contrast," in *The Observer*, March 6, 1977.

⁶¹⁴ Dieter Schwarz, *Agnes Martin, Writings*, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 2005, p. 5.

⁶¹⁵ Agnes Martin, "The Still and Silent in Art," cited in Thomas McEvelley, "Grey Geese Descending: The Art of Agnes Martin", quot., p. 99.

⁶¹⁶ Quoted in Kate Horsfield, "On Art and Artists: Agnes Martin '74", in *Profile*, March 1981, pp. 6 - 7.

The vacuum and blankness of most of her works was well noted by many critics, works that were “made up of nothing, they multiply that nothing”⁶¹⁷, a silence to which the Untitled title definitely contributed.

In her first experiments still present, as most of her initial works have been destroyed by the same artist, titled works are present, mostly consisting of precise description of the subject, as for example *Nude* (1947), *Self Portrait* (late 1940s), *New Mexico Mountain Landscape, Taos* (1947): these works mostly consist of biomorphic abstraction with various layers of narratives that will be subsequently abandoned. She depicted both natural subjects (*Personages*, 1952) and abstracted forms (*The blue bird*, 1954).

In the second phase, from 1961, she introduced the grid in her forms and still provided the works with titles. During these years her titling practice tended to be evocative, as for example in the works *White flower* (1960-2), *Grey Stone II* (1961), *Night Sea* (1963), *Falling Blue* (1963), *Whispering* (1963), *A Grey Stone* (1964), *Drift of Summer* (1965). These titles should not be understood as descriptions: “One of her paintings is called *Falling Blue* but it is not necessary to assume the words describe this painting or, conversely, that the painting illustrates these words”⁶¹⁸. In another punctual analysis Alloway precisely stated that “these titles are not openly descriptive, they are consistent and have a definite congruence to the visual imagery”⁶¹⁹, an “allusion to nature”⁶²⁰ according to Rosalind Krauss, that should not be interpreted in any ways in a literally descriptive sense. Critics noted how these titles should not

⁶¹⁷ Wilson, "Linear Web," p. 46; Max Kozloff, "Art," *The Nation*, November 14, 1966, p. 525, quoted after Anna C. Chave, *Agnes Martin: Humility*, quot.

⁶¹⁸ Lawrence Alloway in “Agnes Martin”, in Suzanne Delehanty. *Agnes Martin*, ICA, exh. cat., Jan 22 - Mar 1, 1973, p.10.

⁶¹⁹ Lawrence Alloway in “Two Quotations”, in *Art Forum*, April 1973, pp. 32-37.

⁶²⁰ Rosalind Krauss, *The Grid / The Cloud / and the Detail*, quot., p. 138.

considered to the letter: “They [the words] deflect overly literal readings of her paintings (she scorns the often made comparisons to landscapes, for example)”⁶²¹. These words must be considered mental, psychic and not real physical spaces. Her work, at this stage, also due to the presence of titles, has been read through the light of a romantic, evocative dimension⁶²². As it happened to other artists, some of Martin’s titles were actually conceived by others, and in particular by Lenore Tawney: titles that, only later, would be later amended by Martin⁶²³.

In 1967 she left New York and interrupted the production of the works.

The third phase, beginning with the resume of production in 1973, lasted until the 1980s. Her works were titled mostly as *Untitled* followed by Arabic numbers (*Untitled #17*, 1974; *Untitled #15*, 1980), introduced simply to distinguish the works, with some exceptions such as *On a Clear Day* (1973), *Desert Flower* (1985), among others. It is significant that after resuming painting, she mostly eliminated references to the external world.

In the fourth phase, from the 1990s until her disappearance, she used titles again (*Love and Goodness*, 2000; *Gratitude*, 2001), although it is possible to record the presence of the title *Untitled*. The reference to innocence and childhood reached a climax in the years 2000s, when she

⁶²¹ Holland Cotter, “Like Her Paintings, Quiet, Unchanging and Revered” in *The New York Times*, January 19, 1997, p. 216.

⁶²² Lucy Lippard, “The silent Art”, in *Art in America*, 1967, p. 61, already quoted in the previous chapter.

⁶²³ Suzanne P. Hudson, *Agnes Martin: Night Sea*, quot., second chapter, epub. The author also added that “Tawney seems to have provided titles that Martin later overturned. In correspondence between Elkon and Delehanty in 1972, he writes to advise her of the following: ‘Recently I spoke with Agnes Martin and learned that titles with musical references were assigned to her works by someone else (apparently at a time when Agnes was ill). [...] We do want to list the works correctly in the exhibition catalogue – so please do not be confused if Pipe Musical is listed as Untitled’ Rare Books and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, Ms 777, Folder 828”, *ibid.*

composed works titled *Love the Whole World* (1999); *Little Children Playing with Love* (2001); *Peace and Happiness* (2001).

These phases reflect changes in her practice, although it is important to mention that works untitled, Untitled or without title, can be documented throughout all the periods. It's important to note that, at least in some cases, Martin did not title these pieces as Untitled; instead, they were left without title and only later titled Untitled. In the recording system of museum and galleries, as explained, there is no distinction between an authorial Untitled title and an untitled title, that more precisely could define a work missing the title. Only in a few cases it is possible to record the presence of Unknown title, 1959⁶²⁴. In her writings, she typically referred to her works by a basic description, either of the colors or the lines present: this feature further indicates that titles were not crucial. Her interviews and writings can be considered fundamental in reconstructing her relation to titles, although, for what concerns many aspects of her work, "facts shift from interview to interview, or even within a single interview, where evasions or contradictions beget still more confusions"⁶²⁵. Agnes Martin has been considered a "thinker-poet-writer"⁶²⁶, therefore her style of writing enjoys illuminations and sudden leaps.

As demonstrated at the beginning of the chapter, her research cannot be placed solely in one aesthetic dimension, as she frequently eluded categorization and overly restrictive theoretical frameworks. She personally felt closer to the thinking of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock,

⁶²⁴ Reported in Arne Glimcher, *Agnes Martin: Paintings*, quot., p. 23.

⁶²⁵ Suzanne P. Hudson, *Agnes Martin: Night Sea*, quot., chapter 1, epub.

⁶²⁶ "Marja Bloem, "An Awareness of Perfection", in *Agnes Martin: Paintings and Drawings 1974 - 1990*, exh. cat., Stedelijk Museum, 1991, p. 32.

Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman among others: “I consider myself an abstract expressionist”⁶²⁷. She clearly admired some of the artists:

I have great respect for their [Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko] work and philosophy, their transcendentalism. They gave up so many things. They gave up line, they gave up form, they gave up organic form. They created an undefined space. I think that was so important. The abstract expressionists found that you can have an entirely objective reality that may be totally abstract. That’s revolutionary. And they had so many different expressions.⁶²⁸

Arne Glimcher has been very clear in locating Martin’s work:

Although her work superficially seems to belong to the history of reductionism and specifically Minimalism, Agnes considered herself an expressionist and her painting the abstract expression of positive inner states of existence. She was the oldest surviving painter of the Abstract Expressionist generation, within which she related more directly to Newman, Reinhardt and Rothko than to the Action painters.⁶²⁹

In 1957 Martin started her collaboration with Betty Parsons in New York, that lasted until 1961, and this was the occasion to meet the artists of Abstract Expressionism, such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman. She was living in a community that

⁶²⁷ “Oral history interview with Agnes Martin, quot., p.16.

⁶²⁸ Agnes Martin, in “Agnes Martin interviewed by Irving Sandler”, in *Art Monthly*, Issue 169, Sept. 1993, p. 13.

⁶²⁹ Arne Glimcher, *Agnes Martin: Paintings*, quot., p. 11.

included Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Rauschenberg, Lenore Tawney and Robert Indiana, among others. In these years, as mentioned, her titles consisted mostly of description of subtle atmospheric presences, such as *Desert Rain*, 1957; *The Spring*, 1958; *Harbour I*, 1959; *The Lamp*, 1959; *Earth*, 1959; *The Islands*, 1961; *Grey Stone II*, 1961; *Flower in the Wind*, 1963, *The Peach*, 1964; *The Beach*, 1964; *The Harvest*, 1965. Although she made use of these highly evocative titles, she also expressed how they are “not really about nature. It is not what is seen”⁶³⁰. She had her first exhibition in 1958 (2-20 December) at Parsons, a show that was reviewed in *The New York Times* by Dore Ashton: “Miss Martin offers an evanescent, infinitely simplified communication - one that is quite apparently the result of many years of refinement. She has eliminated all but essentials for her poetic expression”⁶³¹. In her next show, of 1959 at Parsons, also reviewed by Ashton, she showed titled works. Betty Parsons was used to collect artists’ statements and declarations, including Martin’s text:

I paint out of joy of experience. I paint without rep[r]esentational object. I paint beauty without idealism, the new real beauty that needs very much to be defined by modern philosophers. I consider idealism and mysticism and conventions interferences in occasions of real beauty. Other interferences are evil, physical pain, mental confusion, and insularity.

I do not paint scientific discoveries or philosophies. Art is not ethical, moral or even rational and not automatic.⁶³²

⁶³⁰ Agnes Martin in Rosanlind Krauss, “The Grid / The Cloud / and the Detail”, quot., p. 138.

⁶³¹ Dore Ashton, “Premiere Exhibition for Agnes Martin”, in *The New York Times*, December 6, 1958, p. 26.

⁶³² Agnes Martin, Taos, New Mexico, Agnes Martin Papers in the Betty Parsons Archive, AAA.

In 1962 she showed her works at *Geometric Abstraction in America*, at the Whitney Museum, and in the same year she began her collaboration with Robert Elkon, where she had two exhibitions (November 7 - December 15, 1962 and 12-30 November, 1963). Although many of the works displayed in these years were mostly titled, they had an “utterly dry intellectuality”⁶³³, attempting to reduce as much as possible any suggestions. It is in the early 1960s that she elaborated the first grids, “paintings that were non-referential and self-descriptive [...] There is no narrative, they offer no explanation, and they make no demands”⁶³⁴.

In 1965 she was included in the show *The Responsive Eye* at MoMA in New York, curated by William C. Seitz, where she showed *The Tree*, 1964, still a titled work.

In 1966 she participated to *Systemic Painting*, curated by Lawrence Alloway at the Guggenheim Museum: “the internal structure, purified of all reference, became the essence of art. The object quality of art is stressed in shaped canvas paintings, but without a corresponding appeal to idealism”⁶³⁵. Also in this exhibition she showed a titled work, *The city*, 1966.

On the occasion of the exhibition titled *10* at the Dwan Gallery, taking place in 1966, considered a milestone in the history of Minimalism, Agnes Martin showed *Leaves*, 1966. Concerning this exhibition, Martin said that it was “the only one about which I have always felt happy and satisfied”⁶³⁶.

The following year she was invited to the exhibition *A Romantic*

⁶³³ Stuart Preston, “Ringing Changes on the Contemporary Scene”, in *The New York Times*, November 24, 1963.

⁶³⁴ Arne Glimcher, *Agnes Martin: Paintings*, quot., p. 11.

⁶³⁵ William Seitz, *The Responsive Eye*, quot., p. 17.

⁶³⁶ Agnes Martin, “Letter to Virginia Dwan”, dated September 1972, Dwan Gallery records, AAA.

Minimalism at ICA, Philadelphia, which included Carl Andre, Peter Gourfain, Ralph Humphrey, Robert Mangold, Brice Marden Paul Mogensen, David Novros, Robert Ryman, Richard Van Buren. A *Romantic Minimalism* tended to highlight the more poetic aspects of the movement, although she, as mentioned, “would deny the relevance of Minimalism to her work”⁶³⁷. In 1967 she stopped the creation of works and left New York, wandering through Canada and the American West for more than one year, then traveling to New Mexico.

In 1973 (January 22 to March 1) she had her first large scale exhibition, after her interruption, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. She showed works dating from 1957 to 1967. The catalogue contains verbal and written statements by Agnes Martin, as given to and recounted by Ann Wilson, who had been very close to the artist. In his contribution to the catalogue, Lawrence Alloway highlighted the tension between “perception and recognition [...] Both by interference from her imagery and from judging her titles we recognize a form of nature imagery”⁶³⁸ She showed 37 paintings (2 Untitled works); 21 drawings (8 Untitled works); 3 “constructions” and 14 watercolors (10 Untitled works), all done in the period 1957-1967. Some of the titles, as recounted by Alloway, are *The Beach, Desert, Drops, Earth, Field, Garden, Happy Valley, Islands, Leaf in the Wind, Milk River, Night Sea, Orange Grove, Wheat, White Stone*. Alloway remarked how

although these titles are not openly descriptive, they are persistently evocative; they have a definite congruence to the artist’s visual imagery. The words are compatible with a notion of the world regarded in terms of synonymous forms and continuous surfaces [...]

⁶³⁷ Suzanne P. Hudson, *Agnes Martin*, quot, chapter 1, epub.

⁶³⁸ Lawrence Alloway, *Agnes Martin*, exh. cat., quot., p. 10.

but it is not necessary to assume the words describe this painting, or, conversely, that this painting illustrates these forms.⁶³⁹

Another exhibition review highlighted the subtle dimension of titles:

the poetry of Martin's titles [...] is disarmingly lyrical, though lyrical evocation is no more her object than formal presence is. Rather, her choice of 'natural' images for her titles simply suggests a belief that what may be experienced through her paintings is something that exists in nature – a quasi-Platonic something whose particular element is the alert and wide-open psyche.⁶⁴⁰

In 1975 she started her collaboration with Arne Glimcher of Pace Gallery, who she met in 1963: it is in this decade that she worked on and displayed many Untitled works. In 1976 Agnes Martin highlighted once more her distance from Minimalism: "they want to minimise themselves in favour of the ideal. Well, I just can't"⁶⁴¹, the ideal was something not interesting to her as it required a thinking activity: "She said that the intellectual was the enemy of making art"⁶⁴².

Martin's research, as mentioned in the introduction, has often been situated within Minimalism, while

in contrast with most of her interviewees, who tended to align her work with the Minimalist art that had emerged concurrently, she

⁶³⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁴⁰ Peter Schjeldahl, "Agnes Martin at the Institute of Contemporary Art", in *The Art in America Review of Exhibitions*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May - June, 1973.

⁶⁴¹ John Gruen, "Agnes Martin", in *The Artist Observed: 28 Interviews with Contemporary Artists*, A Cappella Books, 1991, p. 84.

⁶⁴² Arne Glimcher, *Agnes Martin: Paintings*, quot., p. 12.

more often claimed kinship with the Abstract Expressionists – that is, with her own generation.⁶⁴³

In particular “Ad Reinhardt, a close friend and advocate, played a critical role in Martin’s maturation in the early sixties”⁶⁴⁴.

Her work shall be distinguished from the other artists of Minimalism, due to various reasons:

there were crucial differences that separated her from this generation: their works are grounded in intellection; hers in inspiration; their metaphysics are fundamentally materialist, her idealist; and emotional cadences, whether of exaltation, praise or happiness, were never among their concerns.⁶⁴⁵

According to “her own account, her work reached its full maturity only after 1960”⁶⁴⁶. In the following decade the decision of leaving works Untitled fully matured and found a major expression: “My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed for me in art work which is also wordless and silent”⁶⁴⁷.

Her declarations are extremely useful in order to fully comprehend her rejection of categorization, as well as interpretation: “My paintings have neither object, nor space nor line nor anything - no forms. They are light, lightness about merging, about formlessness,

⁶⁴³ Rhea Anastas; Lynne Cooke; Karen J Kelly; Barbara Schröder et al., *Agnes Martin*, New York: Dia Art Foundation, exh. cat., December 13, 2008 - March 26, 2017, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 18.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 12.

⁶⁴⁷ Agnes Martin in “Agnes Martin: Writings”, edited by Dieter Schwarz, Hatje Cantz 1991, p. 89.

breaking down form”⁶⁴⁸ and confirming that “Art work is not an intellectual process”⁶⁴⁹, adding “no thoughts or notion / Nothing to be discussed or criticized”⁶⁵⁰.

In 1980 she was offered a solo show at the Whitney Museum, and a huge problem arose: Martin did not want to have a catalogue, the exhibition was therefore cancelled as the documentation was considered an essential feature. Similarly to the issues that Rothko had, for his exhibition in 1954 at ICA Philadelphia, Martin felt there was no need for a catalogue. Her criticism towards the art world and what mostly constituted it, was well expressed in a letter, exceptionally published by Glimcher: “the ‘art-scene’ is really a lot of words put out by journalists. With its changing trends it bears very little relationship with ART”⁶⁵¹. She heavily discouraged the value of thinking process when it became useful for speculation regarding art: “By the use of intellect we have created a world of ideas that does not actually exist”⁶⁵².

In the 1990s she was using titles again but “in 2002, this striking manner of titling abruptly stopped, as if Martin no longer needed – or wanted – words to characterize the sea change in her work”⁶⁵³: the Untitled title was again present.

Her scepticism involved anything that was different from inspiration, indeed, “deductions are distractions of mind [...] living by

⁶⁴⁸ Agnes Martin quoted in *Agnes Martin: The Nineties and Beyond*, 2002, exh. cat., edited by Ned Rifkin, February 1 - May 26, 2002, Houston, The Menil Collection, 2002, pp. 14-15.

⁶⁴⁹ Agnes Martin in Arne Glimcher, *Agnes Martin: Paintings*, quot., p. 17.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 24.

⁶⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 137.

⁶⁵² Agnes Martin, in “The current of the river of life moves us”, prepared for a lecture at the University of New Mexico, Santa Fe, 1979, quot. in Arne Glimcher, *Agnes Martin*, quot., p. 166.

⁶⁵³ Rhea Anastas; Lynne Cooke; Karen J Kelly; Barbara Schröder, *Agnes Martin*, quot., p. 18.

intellect - by comparisons, calculations, schemes, concepts, ideas - is all a structure of pride in which there is not beauty or happiness - no life. The intellectual is in fact death"⁶⁵⁴.

Her writings, partially collected and edited by Dieter Schwarz⁶⁵⁵, constitute an extremely precious source of analysis. Published in 2005 they contained various notes by Martin relating to the process of creating an artwork. They were first published in 2005 and comprised a collection of Martin's notes on the process of creating an artwork. According to Martin, it is critical to remember that the artworks have no direct power over the audience, who is solely responsible for its reception.

When we go to museums we do not just look, we make a definite response to the work. As we look at it we are happier or more sad, more at peace or more depressed. A work may stimulate yearning, helplessness, belligerence or remorse. The cause of the response is not traceable in the work. An artist cannot and does not prepare for a certain response. He does not consider the response but simply follows his inspiration. Works of art are not purposely conceived. The response depends upon the condition of the observer. [...]

The responsibility of the response to art is not with the artist. ⁶⁵⁶

Her paintings, in her vision, were completely detached from any verbal implications: "These paintings are about freedom from the cares of this world from wordliness"⁶⁵⁷.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵⁵ Dieter Schwarz, *Agnes Martin, Writings*, quot. Unfortunately, the editor did not provide much information about the dates of the notes.

⁶⁵⁶ Agnes Martin, "Response to Art", in Dieter Schwarz, *Agnes Martin, Writings*, quot., p. 18.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 39.

This paragraph, in which Martin expresses a deep appreciation for a silent experience in front of a picture, encapsulates Martin's stance on art criticism:

When interest in graphic art wanes I suppose it is possible to imagine its slipping out of sight but I do not believe in that possibility. My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed for me in art work which is also wordless and silent. It is really wonderful to contemplate the experience and the works. I am sure there will always be some who make this response who will want to try to express it graphically.⁶⁵⁸

Her exhibition at the Whitney, in 1992, was described as: “anti-theoretical, passive, not prescriptive, and assiduously devoid of explicit references”⁶⁵⁹. Her very last works were left Untitled.

⁶⁵⁸ Agnes Martin, “The Still and Silent in Art”, in Dieter Schwarz, *Agnes Martin, Writings*, quot., p. 86.

⁶⁵⁹ Michael Kimmelman “Art View: Nature's Mystical Poetry, Written in Paint” in *The New York Times*, November 15, 1992, p. 220.

3.1.2. Donald Judd (1928 - 1994)

Donald Judd has been particularly prolific in writing about his work and more in general in reflecting on art, as matter of fact, he was more known, at least until the beginning of the 1960s, as an art critic. In particular he was writings reviews on *Art News* and *Arts Magazine*. In the recently published *Donald Judd Interviews*, it is clearly stated that “deeply concerned with the falsification of history, he took to writings and talking as corrective measures”⁶⁶⁰. Although he was frequently releasing interviews and statements, he preferred that “the person looking at the work should think about it and figure it out for themselves and not ask me [...] I’m doing it, and that’s enough”⁶⁶¹.

He was one of the artists most critical towards the term and category of Minimalism, as an interpretative tool, and as an umbrella to collect the work of different artists. He reacted in particular to Robert Morris' repeated use of the word minimal, as well as to the guiding and constraining categories in art history, which sometimes too defined and qualified the artists.

Well. I hate the term ‘minimalism’. There was in no way a group at all. It's a real concoction; it's a publicity thing and it wasn't very good to do to pop art, either. It's just some sort of publicity thing, which comes from art history, where they think everything comes from styles and groups and so forth, which is kind of doubtful anyway, if you go back and look at it. As I told you before, I didn't know all these people, and all these people developed at different times. Flavin is the only one I had anything to do with, and it's not as though we

⁶⁶⁰ Donald Judd in *Donald Judd interviews*, quot., p. 13.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

influenced each other. We were friends; we respected each other's work. And we were both doing what we were doing when we met each other. [...] I prefer if they damn my work rather than use the word 'minimal'. I hate it when - and this is one of my original grievances against Morris, and also everyone else who does it - they keep talking about 'minimal' art. It's just this big, vague thing. At least they can identify the people and deal with what's actually been done. But I do not think there is a group. It would be much better to clear it away and talk about the particular people and particular pieces.⁶⁶²

Despite the fact that he released more pronouncements than any other artist in the movement, Judd expressed serious reservations about any generalization about an individual's experience of an artwork. In several interviews he commented on the lack of titles of his works, in particular in an interview with Barbara Rose (1966-67) he noted the following:

BR [Barbara Rose]: 'You said that your work is not sculpture. If it isn't sculpture, what is it?'

DJ [Donald Judd]: 'I don't know what it is, and I don't feel that I have to give it a title. So I don't feel required to say what it is'.⁶⁶³

Donald Judd did not want to name his works, as by giving a name automatically they are ascribed into categories. There seems to be a link to the notion of *Art-as-art* by Ad Reinhardt, a painter that Judd quite frequently admired in his writings. Judd criticized other artists' titles, as

⁶⁶² Donald Judd interviewed by Phyllis Tuchman, in *Donald Judd interviews*, quot., p. 498.

⁶⁶³ Barbara Rose, "Interview with Donald Judd and Frank Stella", 1966-7, in Donald Judd, *Interviews*, quot., p. 149

a title “merely names a material object already there to be seen, not something to be imagined or reconstructed”⁶⁶⁴.

This idea was reiterated by Judd on another occasion, when he discussed the difficulties in naming the works:

Donald Judd: ‘in the first place, I never thought of my work as sculpture to begin with. Serra considers his work sculpture, and I think he's perfectly allowed. I'm not sure just what Carl thinks, but I think he considers it sculpture too, and I think his is certainly going. Flavin doesn't consider his sculpture’.

Barbara Rose: ‘If your work isn't painting, and isn't sculpture, what is it?’

Donald Judd: ‘I think it's just something else. I don't really have to.’

Barbaba Rose: ‘It's not another category.’

Donald Judd: ‘As I've said, I'm doing more or less discrete objects.’⁶⁶⁵

In a following passage, speaking about the perception of the works, he commented:

Barbara Rose: ‘Are you involved in the way in which the work is perceived?’

⁶⁶⁴ Richard Schiff, “Donald Judd safe from Bird”, in *Donald Judd*, Tate Publishing, 2004, p. 29.

⁶⁶⁵ “Interview with Barbara Rose”, in Donald Judd, *Interviews*, quot., p. 403.

Donald Judd: 'On the whole, I don't think about that. In the first place, I don't think about any viewers, I just think about what I'm interested in. So I never think about viewers.'⁶⁶⁶

When asked about the possible reaction of the public he answered, laughing, that "basically, the public is unknown to me"⁶⁶⁷. The public should "try to look and think"⁶⁶⁸. The attention on the materiality, presence, structure of the works was something particularly common in Minimalism, indeed, "many sculptors of the time were interested in Merleau Ponty's philosophy of phenomenology, which described experience as constituted by the act of perceiving"⁶⁶⁹, inviting the spectator to rely on the physical experience of the artworks.

When asked directly about the messages his work might convey, he responded as follows:

Barbara Rose: 'What is it that you want the viewer to get out of your work? What is it you're trying to convey, principally?'

Donald Judd: 'I can't state that. That's too complicated – too complex.0

Barbara Rose: 'Are you involved in impact?'

Donald Judd: 'I don't consider the viewer. I don't know about all that. I'm interested in what I want to think about – what I want to do. And if I like it, that's all I want. I don't think about what anybody else is going to think about it.'⁶⁷⁰

⁶⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 414.

⁶⁶⁷ Interview with Russell Connor, for the television documentary *American Art '85*, reprinted in Donald Judd, *Interviews*, quot., p. 545.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶⁹ Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot., p. 105.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ivi*, p. 414.

In December 1963 he held his first solo show at the Green Gallery, where he displayed 9 works, all of them titled *Untitled*. Brian O'Doherty, reviewing the show, wrote: "This show is merely an excellent example of 'avant-garde' non art that tries to achieve meaning by a pretentious lack of meaning"⁶⁷¹. The absence of any references led to a strong criticism towards the works, although Judd pointed out that "they have a lot of meaning, but they're visual, so it's not easily translated into words"⁶⁷², almost directly answering to the criticism raised.

Referring to the work *Untitled, 1967* (burnt sienna enamel on cold rolled steel⁶⁷³), Judd expressed his anti-wording perspective in a conversation with Mark di Suvero:

Donald Judd: 'It's not sculpture.'

Mark di Suvero: 'Cause it's nothing - you think it's not a sculpture? Do you think it's not sculpture?'

Donald Judd: 'Yeah, I don't think of them as being sculpture.'

Mark di Suvero: 'Yeah, what do you think they are?'

Donald Judd: 'I don't know. That's somebody else's problem.'

Mark di Suvero: 'Why do you take the name away?'

Donald Judd: 'Sculpture?'

⁶⁷¹ Brian O'Doherty, "Recent Openings", in *The New York Times*, December 21, 1964.

⁶⁷² Interview with eighth-grade students from Marfa Junior High School, November 1978, reported in Donald Judd, *Interviews*, p. 521.

⁶⁷³ The list of materials is essential in the possibility of differentiating Judd's works.

Mark di Suvero: 'Yeah.'

Donald Judd: 'I do when I can. I don't use the term.'

Mark di Suvero: 'Yeah, right. You call them 'objects'.'

Donald Judd: 'I don't call them anything. I don't need to call them anything.'

Mark di Suvero: 'No, I like to think of them as sculpture, and I know why. It's the same kind of negativity that Mondrian those people who originally looked at - came out of painting looking for brushstrokes and so on.'⁶⁷⁴

It is interesting to note that, very often, works of Arte povera and Minimalism were known and described by the materials they were made of, often the Untitled title could not help in identifying univocally the works, so this term has often been followed by other specifications about medium.

Key to his theoretical grounds was his essay "Specific Objects," written in 1964 and published the following year in *Arts Yearbook 8*. By using specific names, he defined a new sculptural vocabulary to refer to his artworks, as for example *Stacks* and *Progressions*, parts of his *Specific Objects*. Often these titles are presented as Untitled, followed by these words. But these works are not "an intelligible allegory, an expressive symbol or a coherent narrative"⁶⁷⁵, they must be experienced according to their physical presence. For what concerns the reception of his work,

⁶⁷⁴ "Artists' symposium for 7 for 67", with Emily Rauth (moderator), Mark di Suvero, and Ernest Trova, *October 1*, 1967, reprinted in Donald Judd, *Interviews*, quot., p. 204.

⁶⁷⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Word and Image and Object*, quot., p. 247.

it was clear that there were “no allusions’ – the pieces are actual, specific facts of themselves. No ‘message’ – except that a box is a box is a box”⁶⁷⁶. The choice of the Untitled title was an answer to the question: what does Donald Judd’s art mean? In his response: ‘You have to look and do your best’⁶⁷⁷.

His works consisted of objects that

do not seem to be either painting or sculpture, that escape category, that are not familiar, that cannot be pinned down as to what they are. Judd intended these works to be entirely idiosyncratic, outside the common bounds of descriptive language.⁶⁷⁸

He reaffirmed the antipathy to any word in another interview:

Lucy Lippard: ‘Well we’ll begin with this business about sculpture again. Do you still consider that it’s not sculpture?’

Donald Judd: ‘It’s not sculpture.’

Lucy Lippard: ‘Why not?’

Donald Judd: ‘In the first place, ‘sculpture’ seems like a more archaic term than ‘painting’, so it doesn’t apply too well to anyone any-more.

⁶⁷⁶ Grace Glueck, “Art Notes: A Box Is a Box Is a Box”, in *The New York Times*, March 10, 1968.

⁶⁷⁷ Shelley Gilbert Allison, “Reclusive Artist Hopes Colonists Stay Away”, in the *San Angelo Standard-Times*, March 2, 1981, reprinted in *Donald Judd, Interviews*, quot., p. 532.

⁶⁷⁸ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965), 74-82; reprinted in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959-1975*, Halifax Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; and New York: New York University Press, 1975, pp. 181-189.

And then on top of that, its format and composition seem very much sculpture is not identified with the term.'

Lucy Lippard: 'But couldn't there be nonrelational sculpture, just like painting is still painting even if it's nonrelational, even if it's not compositional?'

Donald Judd: 'There could be, except for the fact that it means 'sculpture'. Seems very awkward.'

Lucy Lippard: 'What in God's name would you call it, then? You just call it 'three-dimensional art'? I've got to call it something.'

Donald Judd: 'I'd probably not call it anything.'

Lucy Lippard: 'But isn't 'sculpture', kind of by definition, mass? If there is a definition of 'sculpture', it is three-dimensional art isn't it?'

Donald Judd: 'Well, it's three-dimensional all right'

Lucy Lippard: 'But not necessarily art. [Laughter]'

Donald Judd: 'Not necessarily art. Usually, it is massive. For the most part, it has been fairly compact, and it's located in the center.'

Lucy Lippard: 'Yes. Something like Bob Morris's new things- is that sculpture? I mean, that's not sculpture, because it's three-dimensional in a sense?'

Donald Judd: 'He calls them 'sculpture'. Let him define his. He doesn't mind the word. But I mind the word.'

Lucy Lippard: 'You really do mind the word?'

Donald Judd: 'Yeah. Also because I never thought about sculpture - almost never. The work didn't have anything to do with current sculpture.'

Lucy Lippard: 'It seems like too much sculpture now is nonsculpture, if you want to think of it that way. Just generically, it seems simpler to call it sculpture, and you're usually so direct and simple.'

Donald Judd: 'It's simple for me not to call it sculpture, because I never dealt with it.'⁶⁷⁹

According to Judd the term "sculpture" had a very heavily abused background, historically charged definitions, that he wanted to escape. Donald Judd's works had to be "nonnaturalistic, or nonimaginistic, or nonexpressionistic"⁶⁸⁰, non relational at any costs.

In his *Complaints: Part I* he wrote: "I prefer art that isn't associated with anything"⁶⁸¹, denying once more the relational status of artworks.

The anti-referential attitude of Judd reached also incredibly funny moments when for example he was asked to speak about the suggestive nature of his *Boxes*:

Margot Willet: 'Do you attach any suggestive elements of internal feeling or inner life in these boxes? It seems that there's a great emphasis on shape in much of your work, and in this emphasis on

⁶⁷⁹ "Interview with Lucy R. Lippard and William C. Agee", April-June 1968, reprinted in *Donald Judd Interviews*, quot, pp. 227-228.

⁶⁸⁰ "Interview with Bruce Hooton", February 3, 1965, reprinted in *Donald Judd Interviews*, quot, p. 65.

⁶⁸¹ Donald Judd, "Complaints: Part I", in *Donald Judd, Writings*, quot., p. 201. Interesting is the title given to the collection: *Complaints*.

shape, there's almost a hollowness. And I personally get an exciting, internal sort of vibrating feeling inside, and yet at the same time it's very mysterious, because you can't get in it.'

Donald Judd: 'I don't quite know what you're asking.'⁶⁸²

Judd's use of irony highlighted his detachment from any possible interpretations of his work. According to his vision the work "doesn't suggest. I'd rather it was just plain there"⁶⁸³. He "never thought of them as sculpture. And, as I keep saying, it did not come out of sculpture"⁶⁸⁴. And the interviewer Willet added:

Margot Willet: 'This is very important to you, the assertion of the concreteness and the 'thereness' of the object as sort of existing in its own reality without any interpretive connotations.'

Donald Judd: 'Yeah, without interpretive - but that doesn't mean you're just making something that is there and doesn't have qualities or ideas or something. Say one of those concrete blocks is just over there, which is sort of interesting if you're speculating on things, but ultimately, it doesn't say very much.'⁶⁸⁵

What is extremely interesting in Judd's work, as well in other artists of the movement, is that his Untitled pieces sometimes got renamed, as a way to probably more directly refer to them. As James Meyer

⁶⁸² Interview with Margot Willet, May 1967, reprinted in *Donald Judd, Interviews*, quot., p. 325.

⁶⁸³ *Ivi*, p. 326.

⁶⁸⁴ Interview with Phyllis Tuchman, June 4, 1976, reprinted in *Donald Judd, Interviews*, quot., p. 495.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

demonstrated, this happened for example for the *Letter Box*⁶⁸⁶, *The Bleachers*⁶⁸⁷, and *The Harp* and *The Lifeboat*⁶⁸⁸, simply descriptive words useful to immediately identify the pieces. More interesting is the fact that in some of interviews, Judd himself used these terms, for examples he referred to a work of his as *The bleaches*⁶⁸⁹. The necessity of naming imposed itself over the possibility of the works to remain Untitled. Various sobriquets were applied to Judd's works:

This recourse to allusive titles suggests an iconological tendency in the (particularly American) reception of abstract art, which demands of the sign a mimetic transparency, a referent perceived and known." But the susceptibility of Judd's early work to nicknaming suggests that his aesthetic of non-referentiality, the aesthetic he would make his own, he had not yet secured⁶⁹⁰.

A clearer statement regarding the choice of Untitled titles derives from an interview with Friedrich Teja Bach, on May 5, 1975:

Friedrich Teja Bach: 'Most, maybe all, of your work is untitled, and one has to refer to it either by the names of people who commissioned it or by the forms it suggests, like 'ladder piece' or

⁶⁸⁶ Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1962, Cadmium red light oil and was on Liquitex, 1922 x 243,8 x 19,3 cm, Collection of the artist @ Donald Judd Foundation, Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

⁶⁸⁷ Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1963- 1975, Plywood and pine beams with light-cadmium-red oil paint and aluminium tube with purple lacquer, 122 x 210.8 x 122 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1975. Donald Judd Foundation/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

⁶⁸⁸ James Meyer, *Minimalism*, quot., fig. 40; fig. 34; also quoted in Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot.

⁶⁸⁹ *Untitled*, 1963, cadmium red light oil on wood and purple enamel on aluminium.

⁶⁹⁰ James Meyer: *Minimalism*, quot., p. 50.

‘honeycombs’. Do you think that specific titles would be inadequate for your work?’

Donald Judd: ‘Yes, I think they would be misleading. They don’t have anything to do with any things, so they shouldn’t be titled. I mean, there is no title that could be given.’⁶⁹¹

In a conversation with Bruce Glaser, Donald Judd and Frank Stella, the interviewer addressed some of the challenges that these artists were facing about the non-referential dimension of their works. Stella emphasized the need for Abstract Expressionists to evoke the presence of something other than the work’s materiality while speaking about their approach. Instead, he proposed to have more attention on the physical experience rather than intellectual implications:

Frank Stella: ‘If you pin them down, they always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is there. It really is an object [...] What you see is what you see.’

Glaser: ‘That doesn’t leave too much afterward, does it?’

Stella: ‘I don’t know what else there is. It’s really something if you can get a visual sensation that is pleasurable, or worth looking at, or enjoyable, if you can just make some- thing worth looking at.’⁶⁹²

⁶⁹¹ Transcript in the Judd Foundation Archives.

⁶⁹² Erin Havens and Gabby Marcuzzie Herie (edited by), *Minimalism and Meaning-Making: The Self-Referentialism of Frank Stella’s Black Paintings*, <https://www.canvasjournal.ca/blog/minimalism-and-meaning-making-the-self-referentialism-of-frank-stellas-black-paintings>, accessed on February 24, 2020.

Stella “rejected the “nonobjective titles as ‘untitled’ together with numbers,” instead “clearly distinct labels and names...for distinguishing individual works”⁶⁹³.

Robert Hobbs, however, noted that

[Stella] was not consistent in the choice of titles for his first group of works, since he named them for buildings as well as places in New York City with personal associations for him. Ultimately, Stella’s works are not neutral or transparent, but can rather be constitutive of something — however ambiguously — as they are placed within a viewer’s interpretation and its relative contextual reality of representation.⁶⁹⁴

The analysis of Stella’s black paintings by Erin Havens is extraordinary, as it draws attention on the coincidence between signifier and signified:

French poststructuralist Louis Marin’s description of painting as an ‘open system of reading’ where, at its most basic level, ‘the trajectory of the viewer’s gaze’ will detect new differences in pictorial articulation (or its visual composition as opposed to its verbal articulation) in each successive reading. Marin’s system proposes that meaning is derived through a series of layers in which the viewer continually makes associations. According to Marin, a new dimension of painting is opened up at a secondary level of reading, on the basis of the primary, where pictorial elements become ‘associated with an unlimited potential of figures ‘in absentia’ which allows the viewer to enter a third dimension of pictorial codes or cultural space. However, the self-referentialism and autonomy of Stella’s work reject any association with figures ‘in absentia’ and therefore, in reading the

⁶⁹³ *Ibidem*

⁶⁹⁴ Robert Hobbs, “Frank Stella, Then and Now,” in *Frank Stella: Recent Work*, Singapore Tyler Print Institute, 2002, p. 17.

painting, the viewer finds a fracturing of Marin's system beyond the second dimension of pictorial space. In other words, through the hypnotic lines of Stella's 'Black Paintings', which meet in the center of every work, Stella inverts the semiotic process itself. The signifier is thus firmly attached to its meaning and to the signified as they collapse and become identical. This quality anticipated and later characterized Minimalism.⁶⁹⁵

The relevance of titles was something the public clearly expected, if not demanded:

Bruce Glaser: 'You seem to be after an economy of means, rather than trying to avoid sentimentality.'

[...]

Donald Judd: 'You're reducing the things that people earlier thought were essential to art. [...] If my work is reductionist it's because it doesn't have the elements that people thought should be there.'⁶⁹⁶

Although Frank Stella did not commonly utilize the title *Untitled*, he was plainly averse to the public's demand to categorize and name his works. Spectators "want to crystallize it in some way, categorize it, basically. It seems to be a pretty basic instinct for the art-world mechanism"⁶⁹⁷. In the

⁶⁹⁵ Erin Havens, *Minimalism and Meaning-Making: The Self-Referentialism of Frank Stella's Black Paintings*, edited by Gabby Marcuzzie Herie, online <https://www.canvasjournal.ca/blog/minimalism-and-meaning-making-the-self-referentialism-of-frank-stellas-black-paintings>, February 4, 2020.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 159.

⁶⁹⁷ Frank Stella, in "New Nihilism or New Art?", Radio Program with Bruce Glaser, moderator, Dan Flavin and Frank Stella, February 15, 1964, reported in *Donald Judd Interviews*, quot., p. 31.

interview, he made it quite clear that the public required something other than the strict materiality of the pieces:

Any painting is an object. I mean, the argument that I always had or that you always get into with people who want the old values in painting, essentially all the humanistic values, is that they always find on the canvas – if you pin them down, there's always something there more than the paint on the canvas. In other words, Alexander Eliot or the general public or any kind of really felt opinion has it that there is always something there more than what's actually there. Certainly, my paintings are based on the fact that only what's there is there, and that makes it an object, because it really is an object. I think that who actually does it or gets involved enough in it finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever it is that he's anyone doing. He's making a thing.⁶⁹⁸

Roni Horn and Ann Temkin, The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis, Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA, discussed the issues of titles in their works on the occasion of Judd's show (March 1, 2020 - January 9, 2021):

Roni Horn: 'One of the things that has also been really hard in talking with each other and staff about the show is that everything is untitled! I don't think that Judd thought titles were necessary. He had a very unembellished way of doing things and the way he lived his life, the way he spoke. He just had no interest. I'm not saying I have no idea what he thought of other people's titles, but I think it was an unnecessary thing. Titles mostly become necessary when you have an audience who's trying to distinguish things. He didn't have that problem. He knew what was what and he was very much a self-

⁶⁹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 40.

oriented person. My titles are definitely an interest in connecting with the audience.'

Ann Temkin: 'You're connecting.'

Roni Horn: 'Yes. Certainly.'⁶⁹⁹

As seen, Judd's works were designed to be understood in their whole without the need for further explanation. The artist

claimed to grasp objects expressively as objects – 'in a specific way', as he himself said - and thereby also perform a rite of purification of perception (worthy of Frank Stella's maxim: "What you see is what you see!), however, he would have had to admit, in the end, that even the simplest states of fact can still indicate something.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁹ MoMA curator Ann Temkin talks with the artist Roni Horn about Donald Judd, "Pair Object: Roni Horn and Donald Judd", in *MoMA Magazine*, Apr 23, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/292>, accessed on August 22, 2020.

⁷⁰⁰ Burda Maar, "Jenseits der Sprache? Anmerkungen zur Logik der Bilder", 2004, pp. 28-43, reprinted in Gottfried Boehm, *La svolta iconica*, quot., p. 109.

3.1.3. Robert Ryman (1930 - 2019)

Ryman's work is characterized by a significant presence of the Untitled as a title, responding to the artist non-representational desires: "his painting was chiefly about making, not representing"⁷⁰¹, and is characterized by an "ineffable silence"⁷⁰². The contrast between presenting, making and representing, is a key also of the approach used by artists belonging to the *Arte povera* movement, as it will be demonstrated in the second part of this chapter. According to Lucy Lippard, Ryman "was never called a Minimalist in those days because the roots of his white paintings from the late fifties were in Abstract Expressionism"⁷⁰³.

Regarding the subjects of his works, Ryman has been extremely clear: "I'm still doing pretty much what I was always doing: working directly with paint; not depicting an image that we know, and not telling a story"⁷⁰⁴. Referring to the procedure of painting, he denied any direct references: "I don't abstract from anything [...] I don't work from a representational base. [...] No symbolism. No illusionism"⁷⁰⁵, as if to say that the purity of the work was already there.

His works are often named in series, such as the *Delta Paintings*, the *Standard Paintings*, the *General Paintings*, those constitute "titles" as

⁷⁰¹ Suzanne Perling Hudson, *Robert Ryman: used paint*, MIT, 2007, p. 174.

⁷⁰² Yve-Alain Bois and Thomas Repensek, "Ryman's Tact", in *October*, Vol. 19, Winter, 1981, pp. 93-104.

⁷⁰³ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Yale University, 1997. The essay by Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of art" was initially published in *Art International* in 1968.

⁷⁰⁴ Robert Ryman, quoted in Robert Ryman, "no title", *MoMA Journal*, No. 15, Autumn, 1993, p. 9.

⁷⁰⁵ *Ivi*, p. 10.

just a way to refer to more precisely refer to them. Robert Storr has well clarified the issue of titling in Ryman's work:

Just as the 'Classicos' were named after the stock on which they were painted, other works may have been called 'Allied' after a trucking firm, or 'Capitol' after a steel supplier, 'Acme' after a hardware store, or 'General' after a lumber company." Ryman prefers the concept of 'naming' to that of 'tiding', since the former designates a work while the latter suggests a theme. (Seldom has he named a piece unless it was leaving the studio for exhibition, which explains why so many early works are still listed as 'Untitled'.) Some critics have misconstrued the names the artist has assigned paintings as proof of his latent mysticism. But the lofty names he has sometimes used are those commerce has given itself and Ryman's appropriation of them is evidence of his humour rather than of his hermeticism. At very least, Ryman is having fun with the ambiguity. Otherwise, these 'found' names are in keeping with an earlier method of identifying works by description.⁷⁰⁶

Ryman, very much influenced by the vision of Rothko's paintings, declared his admiration for anti-representational strategies:

The painting looks easy. It looks as if it just happened, that it was just such a natural thing. It projected a different experience. Looking back on it, most of the other painters – even de Kooning and the abstract painters, except for Pollock – had some kind of recognizable image. This painting of Rothko's was not like that. Here was something that was so naked, in a sense. The deep edges of the painting went back toward the wall, and the paint went around the side. You could see staples, it was so open. I hadn't experienced that before...The painting

⁷⁰⁶ Robert Storr, *Robert Ryman*, MoMA, Tate Gallery, exh. cat., February 17 - April 25, 1993, p. 33.

deals with real surfaces and real light, real structure. It's not involved with illusion or narrative or any kind of image of anything we might know. It becomes a presence of its own. It becomes an image that we've never seen before. I think of it as a different aesthetic. Rothko proved that there could be this different aesthetic.⁷⁰⁷

As his catalogues witness, he also used titles, but only for identification purposes, or to define the components: "they reveal what they're made of, proudly, with a kind of routine generosity, thereby cutting short any attempt at associative readings"⁷⁰⁸. In a similar way to Ad Reinhardt, when asked if there was anything so see beyond painting itself, he said: "What the painting is, is exactly what you see"⁷⁰⁹. His titles were chosen with the intention of eliciting no associations:

When he bothers to title his paintings at all he just seems to hit on those with a special sort of ambiguity. They are almost all one-word titles, spare, dry and condensed...He says 'I just get most of the names from the yellow pages...you know, brand names. They don't mean anything. I just want something that won't interfere with the painting.' Naturally, he is not unaware of the humour in all of this. His taste is for the ironic twist in American usage, and he handles it with great style. Thus for example, there are the titles, 'Delta', 'Adelphi', 'Essex', 'Impex'. These names cling to their traces of 'class' ... but none of them really convinces anybody.⁷¹⁰

⁷⁰⁷ "Robert Ryman, interviewed by Jeffrey Weiss", May 1997, in *Whitney Magazine*, September - December 1998, p. iii.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰⁹ Pyllis Tuchmahn, "Interview with Robert Ryman", in *Artforum*, Vol. 9, No. 9, May 1971, p. 5.

⁷¹⁰ Naomi Spector, *Ryman Brand Paintings*, Munich 1973, quoted in Robert Storr, *Robert Ryman*, exh. cat., quot, 1993, p. 44.

He sometimes mixed words and numbers, but never in a logical, linear, or coherent manner.

Despite the fact that these titles seem to suggest associations, his work was not about anything other than the paint itself: “the work was about the nature of paint: the paint was the content of the paintings, as well as their form. They had no meaning outside the paint and the supporting material and the history of the process of the application”⁷¹¹.

In an interview he clarified the use of these titles:

R. CUMMINGS: ‘There’s one thing I noticed, at least among the titles of the paintings. It seems as if they are done in series. Do you work in series or are they just titles in series sometimes? Like ‘General’ or ‘Veils’ or ‘Standing’ or various things like that.’

MR. RYMAN: ‘Oh, yes –’

MR. RYMAN: ‘Is that a theme or is it just a handy title?’

MR. RYMAN: ‘No. Some are not titled, but I try to title them if I can because I think it’s better for information just for –’

MR. CUMMINGS: ‘Discussion or records.’

MR. RYMAN: ‘That’s right because you know what you’re talking about.’

MR. CUMMINGS: [Laughs].

MR. RYMAN: ‘You know if you say number one or two it’s kind of vague. But I try to pick titles that don’t interfere with the work. The

⁷¹¹ *Ibidem.*

General title I meant just as general. I mean, general anything, not as anything specific.'

MR. CUMMINGS: 'I see.'⁷¹²

As evidenced by this other interview, his works clearly lack references.

TUCHMAN: 'Does your use of white have any symbolic or mystical significance?'

RYMAN: 'No.'⁷¹³

Ryman, like Reinhardt, equated the sensation of looking at a painting to listening to music, in which the listener isn't trying to separate every single instrument, component, or note in order to figure out what the rhythm's theme is. Similarly, when viewing a painting, the viewer should not be seeking for a certain subject:

TUCHMAN: 'Do you think the process involved in your work might be called the subject matter?'

RYMAN: 'No. Of course, it's always interesting to know what the process is. It's like when you listen to some music – a Bartok quartet. You're not really too concerned about what he was doing with the music; you're not too concerned with how the quartet is interpreting his music; how the violinist is interpreting. You just listen to it and you're either moved by it or not, depending on how you're feeling or what you're thinking. Of course, it's always interesting to know if you really want to go into it, if you're an art historian or a scholar. It makes the work much more by going into the process and the why and the

⁷¹² "Interview with Robert Ryman," by Paul Cummings, Oral history interview, AAA.

⁷¹³ Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with Robert Ryman", in *Arforum*, Vol. 9, No. 9, May 1971, p. 46.

how and when. But it's not essential at all. The main thing is you just look at it and you see or you have a feeling about it or not. That's what's important.'⁷¹⁴

When, for example, Ryman's show was named *No Title Required*⁷¹⁵ the contempt for titles reached a critical point. The artist made direct references to the challenges individuals have approaching his art, although hunting for references can be incredibly deceptive:

Rail: 'Some critics of your work insist on the anti-biographical or anti-metaphysical aspects, which have so often been associated with your work. Others think of you as a puritan painter, or a pragmatic painter who thinks concretely through his materials. Is that a fair observation?'

Ryman: 'Well, of course. There's no symbolism. There's no narrative in this painting. They're not pictures of things that we know, so that may be difficult for some people...You never know what a person is seeing when they look at a painting. It's not a matter of seeing something in it...even something about it...it's a matter of having an experience, a visual experience that is pleasing. Actually, you're seeing something that you've never seen before. If someone looks at a picture of something that you know, of a landscape, things with symbolic references, that have a lot of narrative, someone can relate to those. But that's not really what painting is about, in my thinking. The what of the painting is incidental to the how. What you experience in

⁷¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 52.

⁷¹⁵ Robert Ryman, *No Title Required*, Pace Gallery, New York, Mar 2 - April 7, 2007.

painting is how it's put together. How it's done. It has nothing to do with purity or anything like that; it's a basic approach to painting.⁷¹⁶

Ryman's case is somehow similar to Ellsworth Kelly's work, who

hated having to give titles--he did so at the explicit demand of dealers--until he had the idea in the late fifties, to which he stuck almost entirely until he died, of giving "descriptive title"--that is, just naming the colors he used (Yellow on White; Black White; Dark Blue White; etc).⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁶ "Robert Ryman with Phong Bui", in *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2007, online edition. <https://brooklynrail.org/2007/06/art/ryman>, accessed on September 14, 2020.

⁷¹⁷ Yve-Alain Bois in a private conversation with the author.

3.1.4. Robert Morris (1931 - 2018)

Robert Morris has also been a prolific writer, “the most subtle of Minimalist dialecticians”⁷¹⁸ and he strongly advocated a structured, intellectual position for the artists, particularly in his texts:

I rejected from the beginning the market – and media – driven prescription that the visual should be promoted to a worshipful ontology while the wordless artist, a mute fabricator of consistent artefacts, was forbidden to set foot on theoretical and critical ground. But since language saturated one side of my work since the early 1960s, it is perhaps not surprising that the discursive found a more focused practice in the writing of these essays.⁷¹⁹

Morris was well aware of the importance of words in art history, as he described works of art to be “afloat on a sea of words”⁷²⁰. Works of art rely on verbal language “with its sudden undertows, backwaters, and shifting mainstreams”⁷²¹. According to him “art objects are totally mediated by the networks of sign systems within which they are suspended”⁷²². In his writings, he was able to create a new vocabulary: his writings echoed this exceptional creativity.

⁷¹⁸ Harold Rosenberg, “Defining Art”, quot., p. 305.

⁷¹⁹ Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, MIT Press, 1993, introduction.

⁷²⁰ Robert Morris, “Some Splashes in the Ebb Tide”, in Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, quot., p. 119.

⁷²¹ *Ibidem*.

⁷²² Robert Morris, “Three Folds in the Fabric”, Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, quot., p. 261.

Although works of art are never fully independent, as they rely on the combination of various languages⁷²³, Morris was able to let works speak for themselves, pieces that do not require any other source of information than what is already present in them, thus erasing the division that has existed between perceptual and cerebral experience for so long. The issue of “content” was a complex topic in Morris’ reception as “some feel that the "art" or "aesthetic" content of his work is negligible, that he is concerned only with ideas for which the sculpture serves as illustration”⁷²⁴.

His writings and practice definitely contributed the growth of artistic languages, both in terms of speculative artistic reflections and as well as concrete experiments. He was well aware of the need of a discourse around the objects: “we are beings obsessed with asserting and interpreting, moving and signing”⁷²⁵. In this way, as Judd points out, his perspective was distinct from that of the other Minimalist artists.

Although he made a frequent use of the title Untitled, Morris’s early works were unapologetically allusive⁷²⁶, such as *Portals* (1961), *Passageway* (1961), and also very tautological, as in the case of *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961). In particular, this work represented a significant example in Morris’ *oeuvre* as the title is truly crucial⁷²⁷, being able to operate a synthesis between the object and its process of making,

⁷²³ “There can be no separation between objects and language in terms of meaning”, in *ibidem*.

⁷²⁴ Marcia Tucker, *Robert Morris*, exh. cat., curated by Marcia Tucker, Whitney Museum of American Art, April 9 - May 31, 1970, p. 9.

⁷²⁵ Robert Morris in in W.J.T. Mitchell, “Golden Memories - Interview with Sculptor Robert Morris”, in *Artforum*, Vol. 32, No. 8, April 1994, pp. 87-91.

⁷²⁵ Barbara Rose, cited in Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot., p. 96.

⁷²⁶ James Meyer, *Minimalism*, quot., p. 50.

⁷²⁷ About this work Morris affirmed that it “had to do with language”, in Oral history interview with Robert Morris, by Svetlana Kitto, April 19-20, 2018, AAA.

as well as the experiencing of it; the piece also seemed to reference Duchamp's work *With Hidden Noise* (1916).

This work increased the gap with other Minimalist artists, in fact, Donald Judd wrote: "Morris's Dada interests are very alien to me"⁷²⁸. Morris' work constitutes an extremely interesting case as his practice, reflected by his titles, represented the collision of the modernist tradition of innovation with the Dadaist research⁷²⁹. His early pre-conceptual works, such as the above-mentioned *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (exhibited in 1963), reflect these tendencies. On this topic, Kirk Varnedoe rhetorically asked: "Was this a new manifestation of the Dada tradition? Minimalism seemed like a revival of the kind of anti-art made by Duchamp [...] anti-art that deconstructs and disengages the category of art itself"⁷³⁰. The imaginary reflections the works offered can be considered a consistent part of the works themselves, Duchamp had a strong impact on his production⁷³¹.

According to Barbara Rose "Duchamp and the Russian avant-garde Malevich were the patron saints under which the new art was emerging"⁷³². After Modernism, in her opinion, there are two distinct dimensions that both influenced the artists of this decade: on the one hand, Malevich's progressive abstraction, which focused on pictorial and formal elements, and on the other hand, Duchamp's abstraction, which transformed reduction into subversion, including non-pictorial elements as consistent parts of the works: the title and language in general became

⁷²⁸ Judd, "Complaints", in *Complete Writings 1959-1975*, quot., p. 198.

⁷²⁹ For a major analysis of the relationship Robert Morris – Marcel Duchamp consider the chapter 3 in Annette Michelson, *Robert Morris. An Aesthetics of Transgression*, quot.

⁷³⁰ Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot., p. 95.

⁷³¹ Robert Morris: "As to influence, Marcel Duchamp is obvious", in W.J.T. Mitchell, "Golden Memories - Interview with Sculptor Robert Morris", quot.

⁷³² Barbara Rose, quoted in Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, quot., p. 96.

central in Conceptual Art. Duchamp's work, according to Morris, was composed by "currents of the spoken, the written, the read, and the heard"⁷³³. The progression towards abstract art is "also one of the repression of words"⁷³⁴ and a progressive "demand for the excision of contaminating literature within it"⁷³⁵. According to Morris, the language that had been removed from the works themselves, as well as from titles, resurfaced in the form of theory⁷³⁶ resulting in remarkable shifts toward intellectual debates in this decade.

Morris represents a synthesis between the two tendencies. He sometimes also titled the works with "proverbial sayings reminiscent of Goya's enigmatic *Caprichos* [...] Nietzschean echoes, [...] fragmentary descriptions of states of being [...] associative puns [...] and fantastic verbal collages [...]"⁷³⁷.

At Green Gallery, in October 1963, he displayed works without titles, along with titled works. Progressively, Morris decided to refuse titles. At another show at Green Gallery, taking place in December 1964, he displayed works without title some with hints in the parenthesis, such as *Untitled (Cloud)*, or *Untitled (Wall/Floor)*, works that can be fully situated in Minimalism. Lucy Lippard reviewed the exhibition, writing how Morris was "a master...of formal silence"⁷³⁸, highlighting the non-descriptive dimension that accompanied the works.

At Corcoran Gallery of Art (November 24 - December 28, 1969) and at the Detroit Art Institute (January 8 - February 8, 1970) he exhibited

⁷³³ Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, quot., p. 119.

⁷³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 266.

⁷³⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷³⁶ "However, language thus repressed was merely displaced into the realm of theory", in Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, quot., p. 266.

⁷³⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell essay, *Golden Memories - Interview with Sculptor Robert Morris*, quot., pp. 87-91.

⁷³⁸ Lucy Lippard, "New York Letter", in *Art International*, March 1965, p. 46.

in total 42 works, and 26 of them were left without title, but ended up being named Untitled. Morris also addressed directly the lack of titles in his *oeuvre*:

I think that the reason I don't title them is that I don't think the work is about illusions. And I think titles always are. And I think the work is very much about that thing there in the space, quite literally. And titles seem to me always to have some allusion to what the thing isn't, and that's why I avoid titles.⁷³⁹

This reflection shows clearly how the thinking of Morris drastically changed in a few years. It is rather common, in his production, to find basic, plain, almost neutral, descriptions of what the pieces are, as for example in *Untitled (Cloud, 1962)*, *Untitled (Knots, 1963)*, *Untitled (Battered Cubes, 1967)*, *Untitled (Fiberglass Cloud, 1967)*, *Untitled (Threadwaste, 1968)*, *Untitled (Lead and Felt, 1969)*, *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes, 1971)*. Progressively Morris "rid his sculpture of such allusions, arguing for a pure abstract art in 'Notes of Sculpture' (1966)"⁷⁴⁰.

The use of the Untitled title, or rather the without title, is also well described in a text by Mario Diacono:

the conception of the work as totally self-sufficient in its reality, which is parallel to that of the lived but does not reflect it, which is at the same time other and inseparable from it, has its corollary in the fact that since 1964 all the works of Morris, even those figurative or rather

⁷³⁹ "Conversation with David Sylvester", a dialogue from a BBC radio broadcast in March 1967, reprinted in the catalogue *Robert Morris*, exh. cat., Tate Gallery 1971, quot., p. 19.

⁷⁴⁰ James Meyer, *Minimalism*, quot., p. 51.

objectual, lead the indication of Untitled, to declare that they are experience and not analysis or consequence of an experience.⁷⁴¹

Works stopped having external references:

If you asked yourself, What is the 'statement' made by or in or through, a form, a sculpture, such as CLOUD you were led to the conclusion that it was saying, as in a celebrated phrase and if anything at all, 'itself'. Now, a 'statement' of this sort appears modest when compared with the claims made for the expressive and formal 'statements' of the '50s. It was also, apparently, overwhelmingly intimidating in its effect. Sculptures such as SLAB which seemed to declare, as it were, with John Cage, 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it', were 'saying' at the very least, 'I am that I am'. 'Statements' of this sort, which brook neither denial nor debate, we term apodictic.⁷⁴²

The author W.J.T. Mitchell⁷⁴³ has shed light on the quite complex reflections Robert Morris has developed on the relation object - language. Morris was horrified by the influence of labels, according to his own remarks, and he even had nightmares about them⁷⁴⁴. Some excerpts from

⁷⁴¹ "La concezione dell'opera come totalmente autosufficiente nella sua realtà, che è parallela a quella del vissuto ma non la rispecchia, che è allo stesso tempo altra e inseparabile da essa, ha un suo corollario nel fatto che a partire dal 1964 tutte le opere di Morris, anche quelle figurali o meglio oggettuali, portano l'indicazione Untitled, a dichiarare esperienza e non analisi o conseguenza d'un'esperienza", my translation, in Mario Diacono, "La struttura negativa di Robert Morris", in Diacono, *KA. Da Kounellis ad Acconci. Arte materia concetto, 1960 – 1975*, Postmediabooks, 2016, p. 135, my translation.

⁷⁴² Annette Michelson, "Robert Morris. An Aesthetics of Transgression", in *Robert Morris*, Corcoran Gallery 1969, quot., p. 9.

⁷⁴³ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Golden Memories - Interview with Sculptor Robert Morris", quot.

⁷⁴⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Wall Labels for Robert Morris", quot.

these notes are useful since the artist explained in a very imaginative way the limitations and challenges labels provide

The wall label disturbed my sleep. It grew to threatening proportions, entwined itself around me, babbled in my ear, wrapped itself over my eyes. It was a tangled, suffocating shroud of seething words in my dream. But in dreams begin responsibility, as the insomniac poet said. Have I had a dream of warning? I get up edgy.⁷⁴⁵

Morris also described the “mere wall label” as “an institutional excrescence, a blurb of public relations jargon, a mere supplement”⁷⁴⁶. The insistence on the disruptive components labels present is evident:

The wall label disturbed my sleep. It raises the insomniac's cold sweat. This wall label begins to throb with ambiguous threat, refusing its repressed status as linguistic blurb. This institutional, tautological annoyance slithers and coils in the shadows. It begins to grow larger than the works proper in my dream galleries; a snarling, looming, hypnagogic presence.

[...]

Now I am awake, yet the label refuses to shrink. Here beneath the dim lamp its rectangularity seems to pulsate, its language groans and threatens. This blot of words screeches and sobs and finally recedes to a menacing tell-tale tick of mumbling under the floor boards.

[...]

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibidem.*

Then with a certain trembling it strikes me, there is no such thing as a 'mere wall label.' The phrase ratchets through my feverish brain. This label, this mutter of slurred information has a secret ambition. No doubt about it, its aim is nothing less than dominating my images there on the wall. Its linguistic hysteria begins to erode the encaustic from my panels.

Show yourself in the light, wall label. Come out of the shadows of the gallery. But this protean linguistic monster hides behind the institutional leadenness of its prose.⁷⁴⁷

One of the most effective paragraphs ever made by artists on the criticalities of labels can be found in this text:

Are you innocence, sincerity? Are you but a few simple guiding words, a soothing 'orientation'? Ah, but I catch your sneer, your twitching suspect words, your double meanings, your dominating strategies disguised beneath your platitudes. You wish to triumph once again (endlessly and forever) over the imagistic. Your agendas are always hidden.

In the light you seem so small there on the wall and straightforward in your brief rectangularity and nearly prim in your crisp paragraphs. You wish to appear luminous with the innocence of your cogent facts.

You are the paragon of gentleness as you tell them what to think. You proto and pre-critical patch of writing. You totalitarian text of totalizing. You linguistic grenade. You footnoteless, illustration less, iconoclastic epitome of generic advertizing. You babbling triumph of

⁷⁴⁷ *Ibidem.*

the information byte. You, labelless label, starched and washed and swinging that swift and fatal club of 'education' to the head.⁷⁴⁸

Morris discussed his views on the process of verbalizing his work in general in a recent conversation with Mitchell.

W.J.T. Mitchell: 'I know you hate interviews, but please explain why. [...]'

Robert Morris: 'I hate interviews because, (a) if verbalizing about the work, I would rather write; (b) they're part of the being-an-artist game; (c) they're performances pretending to be conversations; and (d) I occasionally read the art magazines and can't help wondering if this interview will be as depressing as what I usually find. [...] I'll do nearly anything to avoid talking about myself or the work.'⁷⁴⁹

His language was able to elude typical art criticism approaches:

analysis by either formalist or descriptive critical methods. Formalism has not been able to deal with the apparent lack of relationships in the work, and descriptive criticism is given very little to describe. One is left, therefore, with the implication that the work lacks visual significance.⁷⁵⁰

⁷⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁴⁹ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Golden Memories", quot., p. 1.

⁷⁵⁰ Marcia Tucker, *Robert Morris*, quot., p. 9.

He, indeed, was saying “no to transcendence and spiritual values, heroic scale, anguished decisions”⁷⁵¹, rejecting “an idea of either innerness or priorness as securing signification [...] For nothing inside the author – his or his intentions or feeling- is now believed to serve as a guarantee of the work’s meaning”⁷⁵². The fact that “meaning is dependent on the interchange that occurs in the public space of the work’s connection to its viewers”⁷⁵³, will be extremely important for what concerns artistic developments of the next decades.

Morris was able to achieve an unusual level of clarity in the execution of his work, which

shows us rather than tells us, about ourselves and the world. The act of showing is a process, slowly unfolding and revealing itself to us – a process infinitely more satisfactory than the didacticism of telling. By showing, Morris renders the literal question, ‘What does it mean?’ irrelevant. The central issue becomes instead, ‘What does it do?’⁷⁵⁴

⁷⁵¹ Robert Morris quoted in H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.A. Bois and B.H.D. Buchloch, *Art Since 1900, quot.*, p. 493.

⁷⁵² *Ibidem.*

⁷⁵³ *Ibidem.*

⁷⁵⁴ Marcia Tucker, *Robert Morris, quot.*, p. 55.

3.1.5. Dan Flavin (1933 - 1996)

Dan Flavin began to work with light in the early 1960s, and his first show with electric lights took place in March 1964 at Kaymar Gallery. His works were titled with a description and sometimes dates, as in the case of *the diagonal of personal ecstasy (the diagonal of May 25, 1963)*⁷⁵⁵, 1963. His works contained many allusions, which led to consider possible affiliations with Dadaism and in particular with the work of Marcel Duchamp: “Flavin was straddling the fence between an art of metaphorical association and a purely formal investigation”⁷⁵⁶, it was crowded of “extra visual ideas”⁷⁵⁷. These concepts were often made explicit by the dedications in parenthesis, references his work is nurtured by.

David Vogt⁷⁵⁸ has distinguished the various categories of dedications Flavin aimed to, while using the Untitled as a title⁷⁵⁹: in some cases to his family members, very personal and inner circles dedications, as for example *untitled (to Tracy to celebrate the love of a lifetime)*, 1992, to business partners, colleagues and other artists such as *untitled (to Leo Castelli)* 1992, or historical references as for example *Monuments for Tatlin*, which is the title of a series of artworks done between 1964 and 1982, or for example *greens crossing greens (to Piet Mondrian who lacked green)*, 1966. He also combined these dedications with other words, as for example in the case of *Pink out of a corner (to Jasper Johns)*, 1963.

⁷⁵⁵ All his titles are written in lowercase letters.

⁷⁵⁶ James Meyer, *Minimalism*, quot., p. 98.

⁷⁵⁷ Barbara Rose, “New York Letter”, in *Art International*, No. 8, Summer 1964, p. 80.

⁷⁵⁸ Tobias Vogt, *Untitled*, quot., p. 244.

⁷⁵⁹ In Flavin’s case, although he decided to use the Untitled as a title, so it should be written, according to the distinction introduced by the present thesis, with capital U, he titled his works with *untitled* in lowercase u.

He also used colors as titles such as *gold, pink and red, red*, 1964. His work showed an attempt to extend the boundaries of art: "I have not tried to tease and to test deliberately about what was art and not. I have declared it so definitely and openly"⁷⁶⁰, creating light environments. The coexistence of the different ways of titling also mirrors "ambivalence of his position in regard to the 'two' traditions, his formalist ambition and his attraction to dada"⁷⁶¹: in this sense it is possible to record a rebellion against the strict minimalist formalism. When he produced "non referential abstraction" the critics wrote "the artist is asking too much of us [...] I cannot get beyond the object"⁷⁶².

Some of his titles are known for being unusually long, as in the case of *untitled (to Ward Jackson, an old friend and colleague who, during the Fall of 1957 when I finally returned to New York from Washington and joined him to work together in this museum, kindly communicated)*, 1971 or they also have a political dimension, such as *monument on the survival of Mrs. Reppin* and *monument 4 for those who have been killed in ambush (to P.K. who reminded me about death)* of 1966. These titles remind of William Turner extremely long titles, such as *The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last berth to be broken up, 1838*.

4. The Untitled title in the Arte povera

This fourth chapter is dedicated to a study of the Untitled title in Arte povera: this term entails emerging interests in natural processes, actually fostering

⁷⁶⁰ Dan Flavin, "Some other comments", in *Artforum*, Vol. 5, No. 4, December 1967, p. 23.

⁷⁶¹ James Meyer, *Minimalism*, quot., p. 102.

⁷⁶² Jacob Grossberg, "In the Galleries", in *Arts Magazine*, January 1965, p. 54.

imaginative drifts. In *Arte povera*, unlike Minimalism, it is also possible to document an interest on a more human, artisanal approach: works aimed to remain to a degree imagistic, on a truly anthropological dimension, while eschewing the motif of the human figure that had dominated earlier modern sculpture.⁷⁶³ The focus is first on the movement's early shows, then on individual artists and their declarations, with special attention paid to Jannis Kounellis (1936-2017), Giovanni Anselmo (1934), and Giulio Paolini (1940). The emphasis in this part is on Germano Celant's works, which had a significant impact on the movement's structure and perspective. In the *Arte povera*'s use of the title *Untitled* it is possible to grasp a more imaginative and poetic dimension, helped by the presence of other written hints in the titles, as it will be demonstrated, for example, by the case of Giovanni Anselmo's pieces. The investigations of *Arte povera*, according to Pierre Restany, can be situated within a "crisis of expression taken on by a whole new generation, a desire for 'paralanguage' which translates the awareness of an alienation and the consequent refusal to integrate"⁷⁶⁴.

The *Untitled* title in *Arte Povera* can also be seen as an attempt to keep the work alive by avoiding any definitive and categorical definition: the work aimed to be "no-historical", somehow inaccessible, as one of the objectives was often to "avoid documentation of work, such as photographs or catalogues, and focus instead on transmission and presence (happenings); make work that is inaccessible to almost all potential 'consumers'"⁷⁶⁵ The *Arte Povera* movement is unique in its emphasis on mutability and changing dynamics. In this framework of study, an increasing focus on the process of artwork production as

⁷⁶³ Alex Potts, "Disencumbered Objects", in *October*, Vol. 124, Spring, 2008, pp. 169-189.

⁷⁶⁴ Pierre Restany, "Povertà dell'arte povera", in *Il Corriere della Sera*, June 15, 1969, p. 12, my translation.

⁷⁶⁵ Karen Pinkus, "Dematerialization: From *Arte Povera* to Cybermoney through Italian Thought", in *Diacritics*, Fall 2009, Vol. 39, No. 3.

an experience may be observed, with the goal of denying the use value and instead enhancing the overlapping between process and materiality. – “a movement toward creating a perfect identity of the thing and idea, unambiguous, stripped of excessive reification”⁷⁶⁶.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 66.

4.1. Complexities of the Untitled title in Arte povera

A rigorous research that meticulously investigates, considering all the possible points of contact (exhibition history, travel history of artists, artworks and intellectuals, information accessibility, art books, catalogues, art journals or newspaper, broadcast technologies, among other possible sources), the relationship between Minimalism and Arte povera is unfortunately yet to be written. Only a few substantial readings and reflections have been done on the relationship between both movements, while the majority of them are focused on establishing one's dependence on the other. According to Johannes Meinhard "Arte povera wanted to be the European response to the quantificative and technical-scientific conception of the concept of situation that fed Minimal Art"⁷⁶⁷. It has also been questioned whether Arte povera could be considered as nothing more than "the regional manifestation of an international tendency which was remarkably consistent"⁷⁶⁸; other scholars, on the other hand, have emphasized the independency of the two movements. Dan Cameron looked at which American artists were showing in Italy around the start of the 1960s to see if there were any points of interaction or inspirations. Despite the fact that many historians have theorized on the influence of Minimalism on the emergence of Arte povera, it must be said that "the circulation of information in the form of catalogues, art magazines, and photos had become sufficient to keep far flung sectors of

⁷⁶⁷ "L'Arte Povera voleva essere la risposta europea alla concezione quantificativa e tecnico-scientifiva del concetto di situazione che alimentava la Minimal Art", my translation, Johannes Meinhard, *Arte Povera. Arbeiten un Dokumente aus der Sammlung Goetz. 1958 bis heute*, quoted in Giovanni Lista, *Arte Povera, Abscondita*, 2011, p. 99.

⁷⁶⁸ Dan Cameron, "Anxiety of Influence", in *Flash Art International*, No. 164, May - June 1992, p. 75.

the international art world in touch with one another"⁷⁶⁹. Luisa Giacobbe instead, wrote that "the update on Minimalism in Italy was totally lacking. Only some critics coming back from the States gave news about it on sector magazines, and, generally, not before the Venice Biennales of 1966 and of 1968"⁷⁷⁰. According to Giovanni Lista, by "denying the link of Arte povera with a specifically Italian anthropological culture, Celant condemns the movement to appear as a mere substitute variant of the American avant-gardes from which it would differ only in political and social implications"⁷⁷¹. Minimalism and Arte povera definitely shared an "emphasis on objectivity and the physicality of the work, literality and tautology"⁷⁷².

Although the use of the title Untitled in Arte povera will be the primary emphasis of these paragraphs, it is critical to first establish the movement's evolutionary framework as precisely as possible. Even among the number of artists associated with Arte povera (such as those already present in the very first exhibitions), there are variances, a feature that has been frequently highlighted among the symptoms of incoherence and problematic character of the movement. Germano Celant, who was instrumental in the formation and definition of the Arte Povera during its crucial years, 1967-1971, included and eliminated several artists from national and international shows, including: Mario Merz (1925 - 2003), Marisa Merz (1926 - 2019), Michelangelo Pistoletto (1933), Giovanni Anselmo (1934), Pino Pascali (1935 - 1968), Luciano Fabro (1936 - 2007), Paolo Icaro (1936), Jannis Kounellis (1936 - 2017),

⁷⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 78.

⁷⁷⁰ Luisa Giacobbe, "Minimalismo americano e arte italiana delle 'Nuove Strutture' alla XXXIV Biennale d'arte di Venezia", quot., p. 23.

⁷⁷¹ Giovanni Lista, *Arte povera*, quot., p. 168.

⁷⁷² Francesco Poli, *Minimalismo, Arte Povera, Arte Concettuale*, Laterza, Bari, 1995, p. 6.

Giulio Paolini (1940), Alighiero Boetti (1940 - 1994), Piero Gilardi (1942), Emilio Prini (1943 - 2016), Gilberto Zorio (1944), Gianni Piacentino (1945), Giuseppe Penone (1947) without any strict definitions or clarifications⁷⁷³. Artists have refused to participate in specific shows. The group's unity and coherence also shifted in time: "once they are accorded a certain degree of recognition, however, the general tendency is to deny that a connection existed in the first place"⁷⁷⁴. Even when it comes to the timeline, there have been numerous discussions:

Celant dates the end of the movement to 1971, when single-artist exhibitions became more common, however the movement has had resurgence periods, including with the help of other critics. With the advent of international shows around the end of the 1960s, Arte povera is confronted with a broader stage and other movements, as for example in the exhibitions *When Attitudes Become form. Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information* (March 22 - April 27, 1969 at the Kunsthalle Bern) and the show *Conceptual Art – Arte povera – Land Art* (June 12 - July 12,

⁷⁷³ To this regard it is particularly significant the reflections of Dan Cameron, "Anxiety of Influence", quot. and the article also by Dan Cameron, "Is Arte Povera American?" published in *Flash Art*, May 24th, 2017, <https://flash---art.it/article/larte-povera-e-americana/>, accessed on September 10, 2020. Cameron questioned the actual unity and coherence of the movement, describing possible influences of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg (Galleria Obelisco in Roma, Arte Contemporanea in Firenze in 1953; at the Tartaruga in Rome in 1959; at the Galleria dell'Ariete in Milano in 1961; in Torino at Arte Moderna in 1964; at Sperone in 1965; Jim Dine (in 1962 at the Galleria dell'Ariete in Milano and in 1965 at Sperone in Torino) and Richard Serra. According to Cameron, Rauschenberg has had an influence for what concerns "the recycling of the everyday, and especially the affirmation of humanism in the face of technology", in *ivi*, p. 78.

⁷⁷⁴ Dan Cameron, "Anxiety of Influence", quot., p. 76. Cameron's vision even questions "whether or not Celant articulated the idea of Arte povera primarily as a vehicle of himself, with the artists serving largely as accessories until the time when they were no longer of any use to the 'movement'", in *ivi*, p. 78. Celant in several essays expressed how Arte povera was resistant to what was actually contemporarily happening in the USA.

1970, at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna in Turin). Although Celant played a key part in defining the art movement, the voices and intents of individual artists must be taken into account when understanding the processes that shaped Arte povera. Of course, the study must set the sources in perspective; the artists' visions has evolved with time, and subsequent, more recent interviews cannot provide a totally accountable and transparent narratives of events in the 1960s. In the 1980s, the movement was revived through the promotion of large-scale exhibitions, which served as a counterpoint to Transavanguardia's growth. Among these exhibits, the show *Identité Italienne* at the Centre Georges Pompidou (June 25 – September 7, 1981) is essential.

According to Luciano Fabro “the artists of the Arte povera have always been somewhat in contradiction with each other”⁷⁷⁵. He noted how also the works were quite different:

The richness of Arte Povera is precisely this chameleon-like side that unites the artists with each other, which is also within each individual artist: if we examine a little the works that were exhibited at the end of the sixties, we notice in fact a situation that is already quite complex, a whole that allows a fairly different, sometimes even contradictory, point of view.⁷⁷⁶

⁷⁷⁵ “Gli artisti dell'arte povera sono sempre stati un po' in contraddizione gli uni con gli altri” my translation, in Giovanni Lista, *Arte Povera*, quot., p. 16.

⁷⁷⁶ “La ricchezza dell'Arte Povera è precisamente questo lato camaleontico che unisce gli artisti tra loro, che è dentro ogni singolo artista: se esaminiamo un po' le opere che sono state esposte alla fine degli anni sessanta, notiamo infatti una situazione già abbastanza complessa, un insieme che consente un punto di vista abbastanza differenziato, a volte perfino contraddittorio”, my translation, in Giovanni Lista, *Arte Povera*, quot., p. 32.

When asked what the artists shared and what Arte povera entailed, Michelangelo Pistoletto replied that “you have to ask why this word to Celant. I have always had problems about this. Personally, I do not know what it meant”⁷⁷⁷.

One of the most appropriate reading of Arte povera, for what concerns titles, was offered by Carolyn Christov-Bagargiev:

The term 'Arte Povera' initially referred not to the use of poor materials, nor to a sociological critique of consumer society, but to the concept of 'impoverishing' each person's experience of the world; this implies gradually freeing one's consciousness from layers of ideological and theoretical preconceptions as well as from the norms and rules of the language of representation and fiction. It was these preconceptions that were perceived as obstacles between the self and a meaningful, essential experience of the world. As the modernist ideal of an ordered and autonomous work of art viewed by a detached spectator broke down, a new form of subjectivity drawing on the notion of phenomenology, far from the transcendental subjectivity of nineteenth-century philosophical metaphysics, was posited. The founder of phenomenological thought, Edmund Husserl, has claimed that knowledge is gained by 'putting the world in parentheses' and suspending disbelief. Consciousness is therefore freed from preconceptions and knowledge of the deep essence of things and of oneself is acquired.⁷⁷⁸

Because the Untitled title is a feature of some movement-related artworks (though it is not always employed consistently), emphasis will

⁷⁷⁷ “Devi chiedere perchè di questa parola a Germano Celant. Ho sempre avuto dei problemi in proposito. Personalmente, non so nulla di cosa volesse dire”, my translation, in Giovanni Lista, *Arte Povera*, quot., p. 68. This interview took place on March 5, 1998.

⁷⁷⁸ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte povera*, Phaidon Press, 2005, pp. 25-26.

be paid to the artists' and theoreticians' thought processes as well as declarations about title selection. Some artists, such as Kounellis and Anselmo, made extensive use of the Untitled title, while others, such as Pistoletto, Pascali, or Penone, never did; Paolini, like Zorio, used it occasionally and reflected on it. Within the same movement, the artists' ideas on the role of the title varies dramatically. It's equally important to incorporate the thoughts of artists who haven't utilized the Untitled title in this study: it's a poignant contrast. As for example Penone that declared:

I continued to use the title to direct the reading of the work, to emphasize what I meant by the work, [...] the title was often indicative of the place where I made the work or necessary to identify it. I have done a series of works that have the title Alberi: they are trees, it is tautological.

So for me the title makes sense to me because it serves to clarify the intention of the work and to clarify that the work is not just a formal research but there is a thought, an idea that is identified through the title, such as *Respirare l'Ombra* which is linked to the idea of shadow as a volume, that when it enters our body, a volume of air that becomes dark the moment it enters our body. I would say that as far as I'm concerned, the title has its own need, its own importance and accompanies almost every work of mine.⁷⁷⁹

Although there are notable outliers, such as the suggestive titles of Merz or Boetti, a trend towards tautological description of the works can be observed: the artists frequently utilized names of the constituent materials or shapes, as in Boetti's *Stones and metal plates*, 1968.

⁷⁷⁹ Oral interview with Giuseppe Penone and the author, 20 October 2020.

The components are sometimes stated as titles rather than things that make up the works.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to say with certainty whether some of these titles were chosen by the author or if these elements were employed to identify the works. Unfortunately, as seen in the first chapter, the often-erroneous recording of the title makes it difficult to examine philologically all of the changes.

The choice of the Untitled title mirrored the dimension of becoming of the works:

Rejecting the idealistic, self-referential view of art, Arte Povera reached back through materialism and empiricism towards an idea of 'natural beauty', a determined indeterminacy'. The strong, controlling and rational subject breaks down in favour of a 'multi-dimensional' self, willing to follow the natural or chance direction of the material themselves.⁷⁸⁰

And its use reflected the "critical stripping away of superfluous aesthetic conventions in order to reveal the essential conditions of a specific medium of artistic practice"⁷⁸¹, therefore fostering the progressive exclusion of all the paraphernalia and unnecessary elements. In this sense Arte povera can be seen as a continuation of the reductive modernist desire of avoiding "representation, ideology, or codified languages"⁷⁸². This reductive approach, in particular, can be considered a quality that formed the movement, which was drawn to simplicity in its presentation and means. The choice of the title Untitled can also be

⁷⁸⁰ *Ivi*, p. 25.

⁷⁸¹ Rosalind Krauss, "Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome", in *October*, Vol. 124, Post-war Italian Art, Spring, 2008, p. 126.

⁷⁸² *Ibidem*.

situated within a larger discourse that linked Arte povera to the Teatro Povero ⁷⁸³ : Lista describes these dynamics of subtraction as a progressively dry ascetic ossification⁷⁸⁴.

The iconoclastic dimension, which Celant claims was shared by all the artists, exacerbated the hostility to the notion of the subject of a work of art: an approach that fostered “the indeterminate and latent character of a manner of working that does not grasp on to its assumptions, but questions, compares and deconstructs”⁷⁸⁵, preferring “multiple observations points to univocal vision”⁷⁸⁶. The Untitled title could also be considered a counter answer to “an authentic flowering, a need to label and classify”⁷⁸⁷, growing due to the demands of an expanded public.

The political dimension of this movement has often been highlighted by various critics, as for example by Achille Bonito Oliva.

The title is the proof of acknowledgment of the authorship that the artist gives to the work. [...] I must say that at the end of the 1960s artists, in a somehow politically correct manner, opted for the untitled as a title, with the aim of providing the work with more freedom and to avoid a constricting physiognomy, the untitled actually moves towards a new drift: the viewer takes possession of it and gives the work a personal title, starting from his own story. The open work⁷⁸⁸ is the work that uses experimentalism to explore new forms, without

⁷⁸³ The theater critic Edoardo Fadini in 1967 circulated the theoretical text “Verso un teatro povero” by Jerzy Grotowski, a text originally published in 1965.

⁷⁸⁴ Giovanni Lista, *Arte povera*, quot., p. 177.

⁷⁸⁵ Germano Celant, *Arte povera, Storie e protagonisti*, Electa, 1985, p. 27.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸⁷ “un’autentica fioritura, un bisogno di etichettare e di classificare”, my translation, Giovanni Anselmo, in Giovanni Lista, *Arte povera*, quot., p. 153.

⁷⁸⁸ In Italian “opera aperta”, a term well investigated by Umberto Eco in 1962 in his essay titled *Opera Aperta*.

caging the work in an already defined structured. The untitled as a title is a liberating promise deepened in the 1960s in a highly political climate: it led some artists to flank the political European tension with such a creativity that allowed to escape the obligation to title the work and consequently give it a fixed and firm identity. Therefore, the work could be an experience for the viewer that can be mastered, regardless of the authorship that the artists usually assign to the work by titling it.⁷⁸⁹

Also Lea Vergine⁷⁹⁰ well noted the political involvement of artists working in this decade. The lack of a title aimed to have an impact on the art social system:

Circulating a child of no one, without a name, is a metaphor, it means to interrupt the fluidity of the social system to which an artwork belongs, it stops the passages. Indeed, titles guarantee delivery to the art system, which distributed the work with globalization at an international level.⁷⁹¹

The artists had the intention to “leave the work to its anarchic and elusive circulation”⁷⁹². In this sense the use of the Untitled title in Arte povera would strongly be contrasted by the choice of titles of the Transavanguardia. As a matter of fact, these artists, Sandro Chia and Enzo Cucchi for example, used extremely poetic titles. The same definition of Arte povera avoids any strict and unique categorization, as well explained by Germano Celant:

⁷⁸⁹ Achille Bonito Oliva, in an interview with the author, 2020.

⁷⁹⁰ Lea Vergine, *Attraverso l'arte: pratica politica-pagare il '68*, quot.

⁷⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁹² *Ibidem*.

Do you think it's possible today, to form a systematic and definitive idea of this movement?

It's difficult. Any definition tied to the works and actions themselves, would have to be mobile and complex in order to cover so many different forms of communication. What distinguished Arte Povera was its direct relation to, and reaction against, the historical moment. This created a plurality of refractions whose understanding involves a knowledge of everyday reality as well as of history. [...] Arte povera was a tension more than a system [...] was and is a way of being and of considering oneself that changes like the weather [...] is based on mediation and osmosis with outside agents. [...] It is a fusion between being and situation, between agent and witness, between sense and nonsense.⁷⁹³

Some artists of the group pushed for a definition of an artwork “with no need for intellectual translation into verbal or visual representational language”⁷⁹⁴. This lack of references launched an open-ended approach towards the works: according to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Rosalind Krauss the publication *Opera Aperta* (1962) by Umberto Eco was highly influential: “the experience of the work is flexible and constantly renewable”⁷⁹⁵. The 1968 Venice Biennale protests expressed a sharp condemnation of the art system and the commercialisation of the work

⁷⁹³ *Ivi*, p. 21. This interview is particularly interesting as a format as it is actually the result of “a combination of questions to me [Germano Celant] in the past five years to such friends and critics as Allemandi, Froment, Gianelli, Paz, Sischy, Tazzi, Vescovo, Zacharopoulos and others in debates and discussions in magazines and conferences”.

⁷⁹⁴ Carolyn-Christov Bakargiev, *Arte povera*, quot., p. 24.

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

of art: “the intrinsic need to replace the notion of the work as a finished product with a conception of the work as a process in progress”⁷⁹⁶.

The publication of Celant text “Per una critica acritica” seems to recall Sontag’s text, *Against Interpretation*, of 1964. The Italian critic wrote:

If art returns to being a source of magic and natural elementary enchantment, if it mixes with deserts, rocks, snow, physical and biological reactions, if it tends to enhance them [sic] the discovery of a primordial life in which lies and body, concept and nature, have the utmost importance, if it camouflages itself with the natural and mental elements, up to cancelling itself out in the pure state in nature and in the concept, as the latest researches defined as Land Art or Arte Povera or Conceptual Art seem to demonstrate, theory and art criticism no longer need to judge or interpret, to read or support a phenomenon, art, which no longer needs explanation and justification, but only sensory and mental participation.⁷⁹⁷

The title Untitled can be well situated in Celant’s analysis, artists did not want their works to be interpreted:

Contemporary art at this moment asks to be left alone, does not want to be reduced to words or critical readings, does not want to intervene or offer a reading of the world, does not place itself in a moralistic key, does not accept being tamed according to a univocal vision. and unsensed, rejects interpretative encrustations.⁷⁹⁸

⁷⁹⁶ Maurizio Calvesi, “Una Biennale sottosviluppata” in *L’Espresso*, Roma, 7 luglio 1968, my translation.

⁷⁹⁷ Germano Celant, “Per una critica acritica”, in *NAC Notiziario Arte Contemporanea*, October 1, 1970, my translation.

⁷⁹⁸ *Ibidem*.

Celant's question: "can [contemporary art criticism] be used without engaging in linguistic violence?"⁷⁹⁹ seems an answer to the artists' desire of not naming works of art.

The relationship between the verbal and the visual was central in the discussion of the 1960s, indeed, Carla Lonzi in *Self-Portrait* (1969) referred to this topic in her dialogue with Giulio Paolini: "while others use word and image as two distinct communication channels, as if the word confirms the image and the image confirms the word, in your work one manifests the other and viceversa"⁸⁰⁰. The answer of Paolini highlighted the complications that exist between word and image:

When we look at a painting that offers an image, and as a confirmation of this we need to read a word which is nearby, it is clear that the operation did not work, we cannot distinguish whether the word or the image is the subject. So the word and the image can be at the same time, the technique and the meaning of the painting, right?

The vision of Paolini that considered the text in the label as the technique of the image, is unprecedented, and particularly fascinating. In April 1967 Carla Lonzi interviewed Giulio Paolini for the magazine "Collage"⁸⁰¹: the artist's desire was to achieve, through his work, an impoverishment of art.

Although, as with Minimalism, the practice of titling a piece with the term Untitled was already common, an examination of Arte povera shows can give light on the actual display of the Untitled title. Furthermore, a thorough examination of how the labels displayed the titles should be conducted. Indeed, in art historical reconstructions the

⁷⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰⁰ Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, 2010, p. 146, my translation, originally published in 1969.

⁸⁰¹ "Carla Lonzi, Giulio Paolini", in *Collage*, No. 7, Palermo, May 1967, pp. 44-46.

texts informing the shows, the location of the pieces, and the reception are frequently highlighted, but there is typically little information on how titles and labels were offered to the public. There is almost never a description of how the information has been delivered to visitors in the catalogues, resulting in a disconnect between the exhibition and its documentation. This is not an exception in the case of *Arte povera*.

In April 1966 the show *Primary Structures: Younger American and British sculptors* opened at the Jewish Museum, just a couple of months afterwards *Arte Abitabile*, in June 1966, opened at Sperone Gallery in Turin, an exhibition that preceded the official founding of *Arte povera*. The following works could be seen: Piero Gilardi, *Tappeto natura*, 1966, Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Oggetti in meno: Semisfere Decorative*, 1965-6; *Scultura lignea*, 1965-6; *Lampada a mercurio*, 1965; Gianni Piacentino, *Senza titolo*⁸⁰², 1966. This exhibition, according to Lista, allowed the artists to present the “self-signifying value of primitive materials”⁸⁰³: the titles already pose the attention on the physical aspects.

At the gallery L'Attico, Rome, in June 1967, the exhibition *Fuoco, Immagine, Acqua, Terra* took place: Pino Pascali showed *1m3 di terra*, 1967; *2m3 di terra*, 1967; *Pozzanghere*, 1967; Pistoletto, *Quadro specchio: Due persone alla balconata*, 1962-4, Piero Gilardi, *Tappeto natura*, 1966, Jannis Kounellis, *Senza titolo (Margherita di fuoco)*, 1967; Umberto Bignardi; Mario Ceroli, Mario Schifano displayed titled works.

From September 27 to October 20, 1967 at the gallery La Bertesca, in Genoa, the exhibition *Arte povera – Im Spazio* took place. The show was divided in two sections: *Arte povera* and *Im Spazio* (it was the first

⁸⁰² Piacentino, in a private conversation with the author, specified that his works *Senza titolo*, Untitled, were actually titled "Blue-Purple Big L" 1966, polyester-coated and painted wood, "Violet-Red Small Pole, I" 1966, polyester-coated and painted wood, "Light Cool Pink Disk", 1966, acrylic, enamel on wood.

⁸⁰³ Giovanni Lista, *Arte povera*, quot., p. 176.

exhibition characterized by the use of the term *Arte povera*). In the first section, the following works were presented: Alighiero Boetti, *Catasta*, 1967; Luciano Fabro, *Pavimento, tautologia*, 1967; Jannis Kounellis, *Senza titolo (La carboniera)*, 1967; Giulio Paolini, *Lo Spazio*, 1967; Pino Pascali, *1m3 di terra*, 1967; *2m3 di terra*, 1967, Emilio Prini, *Perimetro d'aria*, 1967; in the section *Im Spazio*: Umberto Bignardi, Mario Ceroli, Paolo Icaro, Renato Mambor, Eliseo Mattiacci, Cesare Tacchi showed their titled works. Pistoletto declined to take part in the show. *Arte povera, Im Spazio* has been considered as the founding moment of *Arte povera*: Michelangelo Pistoletto highlighted how the artists, before the opening, did not know anything about their belonging to *Arte povera*⁸⁰⁴.

In the text Celant described how

the visual arts assert their authority as anti-presence, they aspire to record reality and the present univocally. They intend to crash every conceptual school with their pure presence. They purposefully give up all rhetorical complication, all semantic convention. They want to observe and record the univocality of reality, and not its ambiguity as in the past.⁸⁰⁵

Titles as *Catasta* (A. Boetti, 1967); *1m3 di terra*, 1967; *2m3 di terra*, (P. Pascali, 1967), *Pavimento tautologia* (L. Fabro, 1967) explain the works in the cleanest form possible, in response to the premise that

The linguistic process consists now in taking away, eliminating, downgrading things to a minimum, impoverishing signs to reduce

⁸⁰⁴ Michelangelo Pistoletto in Giovanni Lista, *quot.*, p. 67.

⁸⁰⁵ Germano Celant, *Arte povera – Im Spazio*, Edizioni Masnata/Trentalance, Genova, 1967 re-published in Germano Celant, *Arte povera, Storie e protagonisti*, *quot.*, p. 31.

them to their archetypes. [...] Iconographic conventions fall and symbolic and conventional languages crumble.⁸⁰⁶

The reflection on language, according to Celant, is being “reduced to a purely visual element divested of historical and narrative superstructures. The empirical quality of artistic enquiry, rather than its speculative aspect, is exalted”⁸⁰⁷. Moreover “they eliminate from their enquiry all which may seem mimetic reflection and representation or linguistic custom in order to attain a new kind of art”⁸⁰⁸. From these remarks, it appears that titles should be as close as possible to the perceptual truth of the works.

On November 23rd, 1967, Celant published *Arte povera. Appunti per una guerriglia*⁸⁰⁹: in his text he referred to two possibilities the artist faces, in order to cope with reality. On one side he/she “is compelled to act like a kleptomaniac and draw on other linguistic systems [...]”⁸¹⁰, on the other hand he/she is faced with “the free self-projection [...] discarding all visually univocally and coherent discourse”. The second chance prefers “essential information” and leads to *Arte povera*. In his initial list Celant included Pistoletto, Boetti, Zorio, Fabro, Anselmo, Piacentini, Gilardi, Prini, Merz, Kounellis, Paolini and Pascali. On the page of the article, appeared on *Flash Art*, the following images appeared: Gilberto Zorio, *Untitled* (tubi dalmine, tela, acqua salata), 1967, Gianni Piacentini, *Oggetto*, 1967; Giulio Paolini, *Decima musa*, 1966; Boetti, *Oggetto*, 1967; Piero Gilardi, *Carrello*, mixed media, 1968;

⁸⁰⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 31- 33.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰⁹ Germano Celant, “Arte povera. Appunti per una guerriglia”, in *Flash Art*, No. 5, Rome, November – December 1967.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

Anselmo, *Struttura*, 1967; Prini, *Perimetro*, 1967 and Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Oggetti in meno*, 1967.

According to Celant: "tautology is the prime instrument of the possession of reality. By eliminating the superstructures, one begins to understand the present and the world"⁸¹¹. Luciano Fabro also directly reflected on tautology:

September 1967: This year I tried a kind of immunizing treatment with 'tautologies'. I have given tautological meaning to very ambiguous operations, tickling an infinity of inferences; but at the same time these inferences do not determine a perceptual development but always end up manifesting a certain perceptual state. For this reason the term 'tautology' does not apply to the thing itself but to the type of operation it solicits. From these things a new awareness does not arise but a vicious circle around one's own conscience; for this reason none of these works is worth an experience neither for me nor for the others. They serve me only to manifest a latent condition of our behaviour capable of frustrating its vitality, the reducing aspect of the experience. It is a manifestation of senility. t the classic involutory, reactionary process. consequent to the fatigue of the experience; other times, instead, determined by the effort that an experience would involve. Now, only on the basis of a careful analysis of the phenomenon. placing every hypothesis made acceptable by the process that has taken place, investigating not through cognitive analyses but through pure cognitive stimuli, perhaps it will be possible to locate a preparatory state for a newly original way of perceiving things. Provided that in things there is not already a way of proposing oneself which is called experience and which consists of equally binding ways of any mental process. There is something that allows us to move with ease outside a voluntary, psychic,

⁸¹¹ *Ibidem*.

nominalistic, formal, associative, deductive, inventory, metaphysical, suppository, reconstructive, sentimental, pragmatic, combinative, particularistic, historicistic.⁸¹²

On January 4th, the exhibition *Con temp l'azione* curated by Daniela Palazzoli took place in Turin involving three galleries, Il Punto, Christian Stein, and Gian Enzo Sperone, then it moved in February 1968 to Lugano, Galleria Flaviana. The artists participating were Getulio Alviani; Giovanni Anselmo, *Senza titolo*, 1967 (wood panel laminated in formica, and chain), *Senza titolo*, 1967 (plexiglass and iron rod), *Senza titolo*, 1967 (formica, spirit level, wood, steel); Alighiero Boetti, *Tubi eternit*, 1967, *Pavimento*, 1967; *Collina*, 1967; Luciano Fabro, *Struttura ortogonale tirata ai quattro vertici*, 1964, *Impronta*, 1964; Mario Merz, *Bottiglia e piantina*, 1967 (not in catalogue); Aldo Mondino, *Senza titolo*,

⁸¹² “Settembre 1967: Quest'anno ho tentato una specie di cura immunizzante con le "tautologie". Ho dato significato tautologico ad operazioni molto ambigue, solleticanti una infinità di illazioni; ma nel contempo tali illazioni non determinano uno sviluppo percettivo bensì finiscono sempre per manifestare un certo stato percettivo. Per questo il termine "tautologia" non vale per la cosa in sé ma per il tipo di operazione che sollecita. Da queste cose non nasce una presa di coscienza nuova ma un circolo vizioso attorno alla propria coscienza; per questo nessuna di tali opere vale come esperienza né per me né per gli altri. Mi servono solo per manifestare una condizione latente del nostro comportamento atta a frustrarne la vitalità. È l'aspetto riducente dell'esperienza. È una manifestazione di senilità. È il classico processo involutivo, reazionario. conseguente alla fatica dell'esperienza; altre volte, invece, determinato dalla fatica che comporterebbe una esperienza. Ora, solo in base ad una accurata analisi del fenomeno, riponendo ogni ipotesi resa accettabile dal processo avvenuto, indagando non attraverso analisi conoscitive ma attraverso pure sollecitazioni conoscitive, forse sarà possibile localizzare uno stato propedeutico ad un modo nuovamente originario di avvertire le cose. Sempre che nelle cose non ci sia già un modo di proporsi che si chiama esperienza e che consta di modi altrettanto vincolanti di un qualsiasi processo mentale. C'è qualcosa che permette di muoverci con agio fuori da una dialettica volontaristica, psichica, nominalistica, formale, associazionistica, deduttiva, inventaristica, metafisica, suppositiva, ricostruttiva, sentimentale, pragmatica, combinativa, particolaristica, storicistica, correlazionistica, al di fuori da ogni sostantivo aggettivato”, my translation, Luciano Fabro, “Luciano Fabro”, in *Data*, Annata 8, No. 32, 1978, p. 36.

1967 (six red canvases), *Progetto*, 1967 (a red thread connecting the three galleries), other works of Ugo Nespolo; Gianni Piacentino, *Sbarre su cavalletti bronzo rossastro*, 1967, *Palo*, 1967; Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Mica*, 1965-66, *Rosa bruciata*, 1965, *Sfera di giornali*, 1966, *Bagno*, 1965-66; *Palla di giornali*, 1966. Gilberto Zorio, *Asse spezzato*, 1967, *Goccia*, 1967, *Tenda*, 1967. Other artists represented were Ugo Nespolo; Paolo Scheggi; Gianni Emilio Simonetti. Although most of the titles could be described as tautological the Untitled title was used by Anselmo and Mondino. In the essay that accompanies the exhibition it is written how Arte povera aimed to the “denuding this enormous allegory”⁸¹³ on which art is actually based. This exhibition constituted a key for the development of the movement:

Nothing is stated. Nothing is produced. No forms are transposed. Yet it is possible to distinguish them, to give them a character beyond any ideal purpose [...] The work does not express what it knows; it constitutes [...] something that it does not yet know; and what it must know in order to be able to enunciate it, it shows in himself. It contemplates (produces at the same time) its own action through an in-out of itself that presents its events and deals with its objects.⁸¹⁴

From 13 to the 21 of December, 1968, at the University of Genoa, Institute of Art History *Collage 1* took place, curated by Germano Celant. Participating artists and works were the following: Giovanni Anselmo, *Senza titolo*, 1967 (formica, spirit level, wood, steel); Alighiero Boetti,

⁸¹³ Daniela Palazzoli, *Con temp l'azione*, exhibition catalogue, Gallerie Christian Stein, Galleria Il Punto, Galleria Sperone, 4 December, 1967 - February 17, 1968, Gallerie Christian Stein, Il Punto, Sperone, 1968.

⁸¹⁴ A. Minola, M.C. Mundici, F. Poli, M.T. Roberto, *Gian Enzo Sperone. Torino Roma New York. 35 anni di mostre tra Europa e America*, Hopefulmonster, Torino, 2000, p. 26.

Mimetico, 1966; Luciano Fabro, *Impronta*, 1964; Giulio Paolini, *A poem*, 1967; Pino Pascali, *Machine gun*, 1965; Gianni Piacentino, *Palo*, 1967 Emilio Prini, *Passi*, 1967; Gilberto Zorio, *Goccia*, 1967; and Mario Ceroli; Piero Gilardi; Paolo Icaro; Renato Mambor; Gianni Emilio Simonetti; Cesare Tacchi. During the opening various happenings took place (Michelangelo Pistoletto cut the hair of his wife, and his daughter was roller-skating around the room). On this occasion Anselmo titled his work with the term *Untitled*, followed, as part of the title, by the materials the work was made of. The exhibition in Turin, at Deposito Arte Presente was marked by the participation of Pier Paolo Calzolari and Marisa Merz, who also used the *Untitled* as a title. This show was notable because it was the first time a warehouse was used as a venue, giving birth to a trend that would characterize the evolution of galleries in the decades to come. The use of this space was suggested by Gian Enzo Sperone⁸¹⁵. Works exhibited included: Giovanni Anselmo, *Senza titolo*, 1966 (iron, wood, force of gravity), *Untitled*, 1967 (transparent perspex and iron rods), *Senza titolo*, 1967 (iron, wood, transparent polyethylene), *Senza titolo*, 1967 (wood laminated with formica and magnetic needle), *Cuscino*, 1967, *Senza titolo*, 1967 (sphere, water, formica); Alighiero Boetti, *Scala*, 1966, *Legnetti colorati*, 1966, *Untitled*, 1966 (plexiglass container and mixed materials), *Pietre e lamiere*, 1968, *Palla corda*, 1968; Pier Paolo Calzolari, *Senza titolo*, 1967 (artificial grass and frozen bar), *Senza titolo*, 1968 (cubic perimeter of cellophane boxes which emit colored smoke), *Come lago del cuore*, 1968, *Senza titolo*, 1968 (strip of undulated lead painted fuchsia pink); Jannis Kounellis, *Senza titolo*, 1967 (structure of

⁸¹⁵ Described as “a room of 450 square meters in via S. Fermo 3, formerly a garage. Not a stately place, therefore, but a single, large room on the ground floor, rougher than any residential unit, forerunner of the exhibition spaces of industrial or artisanal origin”, A. Minola, M. C. Mundici, F. Poli, M. T. Roberto, *Gian Enzo Sperone. Torino Roma New York 35 anni di mostre tra Europa e America*, quot., p. 26.

iron and coal); Mario Merz, *Objects cache-toi*, 1968, *Solitario solidale*, 1968, *Cera e gomma*, 1968, *Igloo (Mai alzato pietra su pietra)*, 1968; Marisa Merz, *Senza titolo*, 1966 (blanket rolled up and tied with steel wire), *Senza titolo*, 1966 (blanket rolled up and tied with adhesive tape), *Senza titolo*, 1967 (metal mesh and wool), *Scodella di sale*, 1967; Giulio Paolini, *Averroè*, 1967; Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Bagno-barca*, 1966-68; Gilberto Zorio, *Sedia*, 1966; *Senza titolo*, 1967 (metal tubes, inner tube), *Rosa blu rosa*, 1967; *Senza titolo*, 1967 (plastic tube, partially deflated inner tubes), *Senza titolo*, 1967 (canvas, iron, acid), *Senza titolo*, 1968 (polished metal and rubber cone), *Piombi*, 1968, *Luci*, 1968, *Il fuoco è passato*, 1968, *Macchia*, 1968.

From February 24 to March 15 the exhibition *Arte povera* curated by Germano Celant took place at the Galleria De Foscherari in Bologna, in 1968. Participating artists included Giovanni Anselmo, *Senza titolo*, 1967 (wood panel laminated in formica, and chain); Alighiero Boetti, *Bilancia*, 1966, *Pietre e lamiere*, 1967, *Mimetico*, 1966; Luciano Fabro, *Ruota*, 1964; Jannis Kounellis, *Senza titolo*, 1967 (iron and cotton structure); Mario Merz, *Cestone*, 1967; Giulio Paolini, *Averroè*, 1967; Pino Pascali, *Un metro cubo di terra*, 1967; Gianni Piacentino, *Tavolo*, 1967; Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Bagno-barca*, 1966-68; Emilio Prini, *Ipotesi sullo spazio totale*, 1967; Gilberto Zorio, *Senza titolo*, 1968 (two sheets of steel held apart and parallel by four suction cups); Mario Ceroli. Celant denounced how a rich art was actually “abusing the power of the literary aspect”⁸¹⁶, against an art, *Arte povera*, that “does not represent, it presents”⁸¹⁷. In a following passage the author described how the “effort is to communicate through a medium that is totally unambiguous and granting nothing to semantic ambiguity [...]”⁸¹⁸. In the same essay,

⁸¹⁶ Germano Celant, *Arte povera*, Edizioni Galleria De Foscherari, Bologna, 1968, n. p.

⁸¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

Celant described the role language played, “reduced to a purely visual element divested of historical – symbolical superstructures”⁸¹⁹. Moreover, the author highlighted how Arte povera preferred “essential information, it divests the image of its ambiguity and of the conventions that make it the negation of a concept”⁸²⁰.

From 4 to 6 October, 1968, *Arte povera + azione povera*, curated by Germano Celant took place in Amalfi, at the Arsenali dell’Antica Repubblica, on the occasion of the 3rd *Rassegna di Arti Figurative* organized by the Centro Studi Colautti, Salerno. Participating artists, in the Arte povera section were: Giovanni Anselmo, *Senza titolo*, 1967 (formica, spirit level, wood, steel), *Direzione*, 1968, Mario Ceroli; Alighiero Boetti, *Tappeto gommapiuma*, 1966, *Tavolo e quattro sedie*, 1967, *Sedie a sdraio*, 1966, *Due bottiglioni*, 1967, *Lavagna*, 1967, *Lastre di vetro*, 1966, *Cinque palloni*, 1967, *Altoparlante verde*, 1966, *Lastra di legno*, 1966, *Lampada annuale*, 1966, *Scala*, 1966; Luciano Fabro, *L’Italia*, 1968, *Felce*, 1968, *Cristallo mezzo specchiato mezzo trasparente*, 1965; Jannis Kounellis, *Senza titolo*, 1968 (wool, rope, wood structure); Mario Merz, *Senza titolo*, 1968 (wicker cone with boiling bean pot inside), *Lance*, 1967, *Sit-in*, 1968; Marisa Merz, *Senza titolo*, 1967 (wire mesh, nylon thread, knitting needles); Giulio Paolini, *Title*, 1968; Pino Pascali, *Vedova blu*, 1968; Gianni Piacentino, *Specchiera*, 1967, *Oggetto marmorizzato*, 1968; Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Mappamondo*, 1966-68, *Candele*, 1967, *Tenda di lampadine*, 1966, *Monumentino*, 1968. (Pistoletto also executes some works with rags, integrating them with Roman ruins in the part of the arsenal allotted him); Gilberto Zorio, *Rosa Blu Rosa*, 1967, *Il fuoco è passato*, 1968, *Spugna fluorescente*, 1968, *Senza titolo*, 1968 (iron, wire mesh, canvas, granite). In the section *Azioni povere* the following artists performed various actions:

⁸¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁸²⁰ *Ibidem*.

Anne Merie Boetti; Riccardo Camoni; Jan Dibbets, Paolo Icaro; Pietro Lista; Gino Marotta, Plinio Martelli, Richard Long, Ger van Elk. For most of these actions there is no title mentioned, they existed in their own moment.

In 1968 it is possible to record, as mentioned, a drift towards a more international dimension of *Arte povera*. *Op Losse schroeven: situaties en cryptostructuren* opened in Amsterdam at the Stedelijk Museum, from March 15 to April 27, 1968, curated by Wim A. L. Beeren. Untitled works are presented by Anselmo; *Untitled* (Structure that eats lettuce), 1968; *Untitled* (glass, mirror, cotton), 1968; Pier Paolo Calzolari; *Untitled* (lead, mercury), 1969, Kounellis, *Untitled* (trolley and coal), 1967; *Untitled* (pink wool and wood poles), 1969 among other titled works by Carl Andre; Joseph Beuys; Bill Bollinger; Walter De Maria; Jan Dibbets; Ger van Elk; Rafael Ferrer; Michael Heizer; Douglas Huebler; Paolo Icaro; Neil Jenney; Olle Kaks; Mario Merz, Marisa Merz; Robert Morris; Bruce Nauman; Dennis Oppenheim; Panamarenko; Emilio Prini; Reiner Ruthernbeck; Robert Ryman; Alan Saret, Richard Serra; Robert Smithson; Keith Sonnier; Frank Winer, Lawrence Weiner; Gilberto Zorio.

At the renowned exhibition *When Attitudes become form. Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information* (Kunsthalle, Bern, March 22 – April 27, 1969) Anselmo and Kounellis displayed Untitled work among other artists. On a total of 148 works only 16 were left Untitled⁸²¹.

A particularly disruptive review was published in *Corriere della Sera*, signed by Leonardo Vergani ⁸²², and titled “Spazzatura alla Kunsthalle [Trash at the Kunsthalle]. It is relevant to quote the review, as the author seemed to be ironical about the lack of titles:

⁸²¹ Many of the total are also not titled as they consist mostly of actions or improvisations (25 in total).

⁸²² Vergani was a particularly reactionary critic.

‘Untitled’: it is a work by Anselmo from Turin: two granite stones between which a high voltage wire is inserted. Anselmo himself also presented a concrete block from which a cowhide comes out; as well as other no less problematic ‘sculptures’.⁸²³

Vergani denounced also how incomprehensible the language was:

The Kunsthalle has the appearance of an exhibition turned upside down by vandals and disturbed by an explosion. It is an art that does not want to integrate, in which technological processes are rejected and in which there is no problem of language because everything, according to these artists, becomes an explicit material.⁸²⁴

What interested various art critics was the “reality” of the works, which were not mediated, as evident by this review published on *L’Espresso*:

For the vast majority, traditional art is still a translation of reality, where the translator's conceptions are primordial. There, nothing is translated, the work is at the same time simple, less constructed, less artificial and more obvious. Without counterfeiting it, without evoking it, without using it to become an art object, the artist questions reality.⁸²⁵

⁸²³ Leonardo Vergani, “Spazzatura alla Kusnthalle”, in *Corriere della Sera*, March 30, 1969, p. 12.

⁸²⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁸²⁵ Original: “Pour l'immense majorité, l'art traditionnel est encore une traduction du réel, où les conceptions du traducteur sont primordiales. Là, rien n'est traduit, l'œuvre est à la fois simple, moins construite, moins artificielle et plus évidente. Sans le contrefaire, sans l'évoquer, sans l'utiliser pour faire objet d'art, l'artiste interroge le réel”, (my translation), quoted from (unclear authors, signed with G and B), “A la Kunsthalle a Berne”, in *L’Express*, March 29, 1969, p. 26.

Another review, which described the request for explanations addressed to the Grand Council of Bern following the exhibition, heavily criticized the Kunsthalle activity, for the “questionable experience”⁸²⁶ Szeeman conceived. The show was described as “scandalous, shameless, capable of distorting aesthetic sensitivity”⁸²⁷.

An interesting review by Angelo Dragone on *La Stampa* highlighted the difficult and incomprehensible character of the art of that time, describing the unexpected compositions of the very often Untitled works⁸²⁸.

At the following exhibitions Anselmo, Kounellis and Zorio made an extensive use of the title Untitled, while Mario Merz used more suggestive titles, such as *Iglou di Giap (se il nemico si concentra perde terreno se si disperde perde forza)* (*if the enemy concentrates, he loses ground, if he disperses, he loses strength*), as well as Alighiero Boetti and Luciano Fabro. Other artists, such as Gianni Piacentino and Michelangelo Pistoletto used basic descriptive and tautological titles.

In 1969, in the text published by Mazzotta Editore, Celant described clearly the relationship of the artist with the process of creation: “without reworking that world. He does not pass judgment on it. He does not seek a moral or social value. He does not manipulate it. He simply discloses it”⁸²⁹. In this text Celant quoted John Dewey⁸³⁰, whose thought deeply shaped a sensorial approach to works of art. In particular the Italian art

⁸²⁶ M. G. Chelnique, “La Kunsthalle ne doit pas servir de foire aux expériences douteuses”, in *L'Express*, May 19, 1969, p. 8.

⁸²⁷ P. Ch., “Sensibles a l’art”, in *L'Express*, December 4, 1969, p. 1.

⁸²⁸ Angelo Dragone, “Gli Artisti d’Avanguardia a Torino. Sculture con altoparlanti e lampade al neon”, in *La Stampa Sera*, February 21, 1969.

⁸²⁹ Germano Celant, *Arte povera*, Milano Gabriele Mazzotta Editore, 1969 reprinted in Germano Celant, *Arte povera. Storia e storie*, quot., p. 119

⁸³⁰ his influence was particularly consistent in the setting up and structuring of the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

historian well noted the attention of Arte povera artists on “the sensory, the sensational, the sensitive, the sensible, the sentimental and the sensuous”⁸³¹, which also aimed to protect the integrity and autonomy of the pieces. The artist’s endeavors “do not offer themselves as affirmations or indications of values, or even as models of behavior”⁸³². Celant’s reflection on the titles of an Arte povera artist is particularly fascinating: “his works are often untitled, almost as though to establish a physical –mnemonic certificate of experiment, and not an analysis or the later development of an experience”⁸³³. The art historian noted how the title functioned as a piece of record, as a mere information string, useful as a “certificate”. The artist that belongs to Arte povera

gives up description and representation [...] abandons the linguistic mediation of the image to try his luck in an aleatory space. He finds it unbearable to consider art as a bearer of anticipatory values [...] He rejects the role of the prophet. [...] He denies the moralistic falseness of the artistic product.⁸³⁴

The art historian expressed a strong resistance towards the discursiveness and capacity of narration by images, more perceivable as single units: “A consequence of this attitude is the impossibility to believe in discourse by images; in the communication of new explicative and instructive information; or in structures that impose regularity, behavior, or syntax.”⁸³⁵ Celant described the “aversion to argument, and

⁸³¹ Germano Celant, *Arte povera*, Milano Gabriele Mazzotta Editore, quot., p. 119

⁸³² *Ivi*, p. 119

⁸³³ *Ibidem*.

⁸³⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁸³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 121.

an aspiration to aphasia and immobility [...] a spoliation pillage” and “the abandonment of the reassuring recognition”⁸³⁶.

Arte povera found itself very far from Pop art, and Minimalism, that functioned, according to Celant, “across the intellectualistic screen of critical-historical interpretation [...] it is a separate language that speculates on the codes and instruments of communication, to occupy a dimension of exclusiveness and recognizability that makes it classist and aristocratic”⁸³⁷.

Arte povera is “devoid of recognizable constants. It is disorientated, infinite, non-deductible, given the indeterminacy of the evolution cycle of everyday reality”: the Untitled title matches this interpretation by leaving no space for determination. The works by Arte povera artists “are merely presentations of a term of life. They do not accept relations. They do not represent. They present”⁸³⁸.

Celant, according to Dan Cameron, was attempting to distinguish the Italian movement from contemporary American practices: “The myth continues to create superthings, while reality and life call not for superthings, but for obvious, commonplace, and nameless things”⁸³⁹.

The following exhibitions, such as *Arte Povera* at the Galleria Civica of Turin, were sometimes criticized due to the extremely sophisticated character, in particular for the “intellectual tricks”⁸⁴⁰ artists were attempting to play on spectators.

⁸³⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸³⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸³⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁸³⁹ Germano Celant, *Senza titolo*, 1971, Kunstverein, reprinted in Germano Celant, *Arte povera, Storia e storie*, quot., p. 154

⁸⁴⁰ Marziano Bernardi, “Un’ampia mostra a Torino. Sconcertante Arte Povera, in *La Stampa*, June 13, 1970, p. 8.

4.1.1. Jannis Kounellis (1936 - 2017)

In terms of his own writing as pronouncements of will, Kounellis has been extremely prolific; his style is visionary and thick with references. The availability of various interviews is a valuable source for understanding the artist's relationship with words, texts, and titles. As a matter of fact, his writing in this format is far more explicit and instructive, and far less allegorical and figurative.

These interviews have been thoroughly examined, and while he did not specifically mention his titling practice, they can provide insight into his attitude toward language and his opposition to his works' didactic or didascalistic significance. The artist's research is marked by a very wide range of practices and media, and the title *Untitled* is a constant presence throughout all his career. From 1956 to 1962 his paintings depicted signs and letter, painted as stencils, connecting to the world of advertisement and road signs, these works are known in general as *Alfabeti* or *Figures and Letters*. Titles indicated or rather summarized some of the visible letters, as in the case of *Z-3* (1961). Other titles were *Signals* (1960), or *Signal* (1960), clearly describing what the works apparently depicted. Many of the works of this kind are titled *Untitled*. He wrote: "I have not borrowed linguistic fragments, unless out of necessity"⁸⁴¹, titles seem as little suggestive as possible, not offering particularly revelatory interpretations. These painted fragments were charged with a specific function as they forced the visitor to actually read⁸⁴². Apparently, these

⁸⁴¹ Jannis Kounellis, "I Have Never Killed Anyone but Am Prepared to Do So", in *From the Europe of Old*, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, 1987, quoted in Jannis Kounellis, *Echoes in the Darkness, Writings and Interviews 1966-2012*, edited by Mario Codognato and Mirta D'Argenzio, Trolley 2002, p. 56.

⁸⁴² "Even the paintings with numbers, my early ones, were a sort of happening. They turned into 'something that you read, into matter, and they were meant to prompt a kind of life ritual", from Jannis Kounellis, "Tecniche e materiali", interview by Marisa Volpi,

letters were senseless combination, cryptic mathematical formulas, but Kounellis revealed what these “recognizable and significant characters and letters meant to the viewer, nothing beyond what they see. But not to me. They indicated the names of my favourites at the time”⁸⁴³. This assertion cannot be supported by other contemporaneous declarations or interviews, and it is conceivable to dispute that secret messages were inscribed in these works, given the large number of combinations and formats⁸⁴⁴. They appear to reject any meanings outside of their shapes, fostering a type of anonymity and industrial production that is as impersonal as possible. As these features of painting were becoming a style, Kounellis decided to abandon them in the mid of the 1960s (he produced still some at the end of the decade), introducing figures such as roses and flowers, also constructed with stencils, that he kept developing in the 1970s.

In the following decades he mostly used the title *Untitled*. The refusal of a direct literary description of the works was made explicit as he considered himself “a silent poet, a blind painter, a deaf musician”⁸⁴⁵. He noted how he did not want to reproduce reality: “Realism represent while I present”⁸⁴⁶, denying the desire to transform and reshape the

Marcatrè, No. 37 - 40, May 1968, p. 73. A photograph documents the performative aspect of the work (reproduced in Germano Celant, *Jannis Kounellis*, exhibition catalogue, Musei di Rimini, Musei Comunali, July 16 - September 30, 1983, p. 35.

⁸⁴³ Jannis Kounellis, “Interview with Franco Fanelli”, in *Il Giornale dell’Arte*, No. 24, January 1989, in *Echoes*, quot., p. 237.

⁸⁴⁴ These signs have been seen as “undoubtedly compositional signs, somewhere between image, language and arithmetic, intended to be recited in the midst of unconnected babblings”, from Gloria Moure, *Jannis Kounellis: Works, Writings 1985 - 2000*, Barcelona 2001, p. 25.

⁸⁴⁵ Jannis Kounellis, *Interview with Bruno Corà*, Paris, ARC, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1980, in Jannis Kounellis, *Echoes*, quot., p. 178.

⁸⁴⁶ Jannis Kounellis, “Le parole per dirmi” in *L’Espresso*, 1 August 1996, pp. 102-103, in Jannis Kounellis, *Echoes*, p. 100.

existing: the title Untitled can be situated in this broader research. As Mario Diacono has written, Kounellis' works are "illustration deniers, end in themselves of their symbolic nakedness, deprived of magical or holy meaning"⁸⁴⁷. Kounellis' works, thanks to their being Untitled "were even more left free to wander"⁸⁴⁸

Carla Lonzi's interview is extremely valuable in terms of Kounellis' rapport with the public:

K: 'I don't want to give the viewer a ready-made object, but to make him work with his imagination. That's why I wrote 'Giallo' in red on the aluminum on that other painting. The viewer immediately imagines yellow, but you don't really offer it to him, you force him to make an effort, you make him participate in a flat surface, but with his mind'.

L: 'So you say everyone has to do the process by himself.'

K: 'Yes.'⁸⁴⁹

He also stated that he wished to immediately immerse the audience in personal imagining processes, allowing them to wonder in their own direction:

I think about a possibility increasingly less tied to the structure of painting and increasingly free, like someone who, little by little as time passes, becomes freer and freer and freer and who finally turns into a bird; something senseless like that, but which is always more

⁸⁴⁷ Mario Diacono, "L'alfabeto di Kounellis", La Tartaruga, Febbraio 1961 in KA. Da Kounellis ad Acconci. *Arte materia concetto, 1960 – 1975*, Postmediabooks, p. 11.

⁸⁴⁸ Interview of the author with Achille Bonito Oliva, quot.

⁸⁴⁹ "Un villaggio pieno di rose", interview by Carla Lonzi, Catalogo No. 3, June 1966, reprinted in *Echoes*, quot., p. 122.

and more fantastic, right? And less and less constructivist. These days I like an experience which is not literally Surrealistic, but which gives a person the chance to fantasize, the possibility of an inner live. Reality is so obsessive.⁸⁵⁰

It seems that consequently, as to avoid the limits imposed by language, Kounellis addressed its encumbrances with a direct critique of the spectators' relationship with words: "They immediately take language, consume it, and it's no longer good for anything; they don't leave any place for an inner life in the painting experience"⁸⁵¹.

The title Untitled can also be considered "a matter of avoid the exhaustion of a painting, that requires more time in order to be fully experienced and lived": titles somehow have, as demonstrated in the first chapter, the capacity of exhausting a painting. The title Untitled, or the lack of a title, can be a feature in Kounellis' attempts to innovate art's power to generate new ideas and contents:

To try to open something beyond these obsessive barriers of convention. For we, with the work we do, are trying to open a non-conventional path for language, because language is so stereotyped and becomes stereotyped with continual use, so this is our task: to find the means for exposing more possibilities of communication.⁸⁵²

Kounellis' work is particularly dense of visual reference to mythology and classic tradition of painting⁸⁵³, but his titles are silent. He was fully aware of this clash: "For all the works with an imaginary platform,

⁸⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 127.

⁸⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁵² *Ivi*, p. 125.

⁸⁵³ Jannis Kounellis, "There are often journeys implicit in my works", in "Le parole per dirmi" in *L'Espresso*, quot.

symbolism goes without saying⁸⁵⁴. [...] I don't know what the term 'eloquence' means when referring to me, even though it may seem paradoxical [...] ⁸⁵⁵. He didn't want to cite anything directly:

The matter of citation is a misunderstanding formulated by critics to belittle the subversive aspect of art. It refers to a descriptive, literary, interpretation lacking any ideas of visual clash. It is utilized by a certain category of persons seeking stabilization. [...] No one wants to be unpleasant anymore, so everybody becomes eclectic.⁸⁵⁶

Although he believed that "the only mediation possible is the linguistic solidity of a work"⁸⁵⁷ he seemed critical, when referring to Judd and Minimalism, towards formalism where the "interpretation of the works remains a strictly metrical fact from a formal point of view"⁸⁵⁸. He viewed the artist as a custodian that could grant or not the access to the work:

I am a conservator. A custodian. Invisible reality is apocryphal and its meaning is known to its custodian. Therefore the custodian prevents a general access to the mystical secrets conserved. The origin of composition is custody, and in terms of composition, conserves the order and unites the present and the past. And modern painter is a man of antiquity, as in any other era.⁸⁵⁹

⁸⁵⁴ *Ivi*, p. 176.

⁸⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 178.

⁸⁵⁶ Jannis Kounellis, "Il piacere di giocare e il piacere di incontrare degli uomini...", in *Domus*, No. 650, May, p. 68, 1984, p. 68.

⁸⁵⁷ Jannis Kounellis, in "Omelia", in *AEIOU*, No. 12-13, January 1985, pp. 58-67, in *Echoes*, quot., p. 48.

⁸⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁵⁹ Jannis Kounellis, "There are often journeys implicit in my works", in "Le parole per dirmi" in *L'Espresso*, quot., p. 103.

The value of criticism is precisely stated in another interview with Franco Fanelli: “Critics are and must remain spectators, even if privileged, front-row spectators”⁸⁶⁰. Although he often suggested possible readings of his works, it is possible to conclude that “Kounellis is no lover of verbal ornamentation; his daily life is full of disturbing silences. For him, speech is as demanding an operation as making art”⁸⁶¹.

4.1.2. Giovanni Anselmo (1947)

Rosalind Krauss reflected on the dimension of mutant energy as a feature of Anselmo's work, forces of nature that feed it, in her essay on him. The perception and reception of Anselmo's works must take into account both material and immaterial elements. As a matter of fact, in various interviews and declarations the artist clarified how these elements must be included in the title and how the title functions

more for practical than philosophical issues. In order to identify a work, even if only for logistical issues (transport, insurance ...) it was necessary to give a ‘name’ to the work. The Untitled are therefore ‘titles’ that allow the work to exist as such. In most cases these are changing works that often require human intervention to be restored as if they were newly produced works precisely because they are made up of non-measurable energies and degradable material that must be replaced over time, therefore it was not possible to give them a real title. His Untitled implies the vision, the reading and the

⁸⁶⁰ “Interview with Franco Fanelli”, in *Il Giornale dell’Arte*, No. 24, January 1989, in Jannis Kounellis, *Echoes*, p. 243.

⁸⁶¹ Gloria Moure, “Jannis Kounellis, Configuration as Resistance”, in *Jannis Kounellis*, 20_21 Collection, 2001, Ediciones Polígrafa, Barcelona, introduction, n. p.

understanding of the work.⁸⁶²

The author stated emphatically that he preferred no title at all (no words) but that the Untitled term had to be adopted as a title for practical reasons. Additional words have been necessary due to the necessity of identifying the work unequivocally. The physical mutability of the work is a feature of various works of *Arte povera*, and of Anselmo in particular. An example for what concerns the complexity of titles in his practice is the work *Untitled (Structure that eats)*, 1968. A work that not only changes physically but that also has changed in its title. Although the piece⁸⁶³ is recorded in the artist archive and in the Pompidou collection⁸⁶⁴ database as *Untitled (Structure that eats)* Anselmo sometimes referred to it simply as *Structure that eats*:

⁸⁶² On the occasion of a conversation with the author, through the precious mediation of Rocco Mussat Sartor.

⁸⁶³ “In the Structure that Eats (eating structure) there is a small granite block tied to a larger block (I've had both levelled so as to be perfectly smooth). The smaller block falls to the ground when all the vegetables that are pressed between the two blocks diminish in volume by dehydration. To allow the structure to stand., the vegetables have to be replaced frequently with fresh ones”. (Original: “Nella Struttura che mangia c'è un blocco di granito piccolo legato a un blocco grande (ho fatto levigare entrambi perché non offrissero appigli); il blocco piccolo non cade al suolo finché i vegetali che si trovano pressati tra i due blocchi non diminuiscono di volume disidratandosi. Affinchè il tutto regga, i vegetali devono essere sostituiti frequentemente con nuovi vegetali freschi”, Giovanni Anselmo, “Untitled”, in *DATA, Dati internazionali d'arte*, 1972, II, 2, p. 55, my translation.

⁸⁶⁴ Granite, fresh lettuce, copper, 70 x 23 x 37 cm, 1968: “A version with meat instead of lettuce was presented only once to the artist in October 1968, with sawdust at the foot of the pillar to absorb the organic liquid that flowed. The version with lettuce has also been presented several times with sawdust, but this having lost its initial function, the artist now prefers that the work be presented without anything at the foot of the pillar. Two granite blocks assembled using copper wire held in balance by a lettuce. Purchase, 1985. Inventory number: AM 1985-177.

It is in 1968 that I build the Structure that drinks, the Structure that eats and the Torsioni, in which various materials are used for other properties than just their weight. In the Structure that drinks, in fact, the cotton, due to its properties, takes the water out of the steel container in which it is immersed; and this is because I want to create a work that as soon as it is there it can explain itself, making what it has inside come out.⁸⁶⁵

In a conversation with the author Anselmo confirmed that the work was originally titled simply *Untitled* and that the words “Struttura che mangia” [Structure that eats] were used for the first time by Ileana Sonnabend in an interview on the occasion of the solo show of Anselmo in 1969 in her gallery.

Between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, Anselmo's works frequently used the title *Untitled*:

the work, dismantled and therefore made up only of individual materials, is not yet a work and therefore cannot be assigned an accurate title. In fact, it is essential in the captions to report together with the untitled also the precise list of the materials used.⁸⁶⁶

He often referred to his works by the term *Untitled* title and some details in parenthesis, or by specifying what were the materials used:

in 1969, thinking of time and duration, I build the works ‘For an etching of indefinite thousands of years (Per un’incisione di indefinite

⁸⁶⁵ Rosamaria Rinaldi, “Quando la natura fioriva”, in *DATA, Dati Internazionali d’Arte*, 1968, VIII; No. 32, p. 24.

⁸⁶⁶ On the occasion of a conversation with the author, through the precious mediation of Rocco Mussat Sartor.

migliaia di anni)', 'Verse in the infinite (Verso nell'infinito)' and an Untitled piece consisting of anthracite and lamp.⁸⁶⁷

The dimension of energy as a component of *Arte povera*, as well as the open-ended dimension of Anselmo's work, were aptly articulated in a crisp piece by art critic Tommaso Trini.:

Much of the sculptures by Anselmo, Penone, and Zorio are works that occur in multiple times and in several places in a place - that is, they seem to want to be nowhere. They adopt energetic processes and undermine inveterate logical processes of thought, on the limit between the art object and reality. Objects covered by changes, transformations, leaps, and actual conflicts, for which we have been able to speak of 'art in process'; where sculpture is together action, situation, event; where, more precisely, we see a sculpture or an event coordinated in preparation for the only creative act that counts, what happens in the mind. For this reason, they insist a lot on the notion of energy: which must be understood in its most literal sense possible. Giovanni Anselmo tends to establish chains of actions and reactions, movement and stasis, to grasp their tensions. Visualize concepts like 'everything', 'infinite', 'invisible', with the minimum of energy.⁸⁶⁸

The artist also stated that he is opposed to any closed, definitive dimension.

I, the world, things, life, are situations of energy and the point is precisely not to crystallize these situations, but to keep them open and live according to our life. Since every way of thinking or being must

⁸⁶⁷ Giovanni Anselmo, in "Giovanni Anselmo", *DATA, Dati Internazionali d'Arte*, quot., my translation.

⁸⁶⁸ Tommaso Trini, "Anselmo, Penone, Zorio e le nuove fonti d'energia per il deserto dell'arte", in *DATA. Pratica e teoria delle arti*, 1973, III, 9, 3, p. 62, my translation.

correspond to a way of acting, my works are truly the physicalization of the force of an action, the energy of a situation or an event, etc., not the experience of it at the level of annotation or sign or still life only.⁸⁶⁹

His “things” in fact come alive at the moment of being composed and assembled. They do not exist as immutable entities. They recompose themselves each time⁸⁷⁰ with a strong sense of mutability: “The point is not to crystallize such situations, but to keep them open and alive as a function of our life. I think that to work in this direction, because energy exists beneath the most varied appearances and situations, one must enjoy absolute freedom⁸⁷¹.”

Anselmo’s work was already well definite in Celant’s germinal text *Appunti per una guerriglia*: “Objects come to life at the moment they are composed and assembled. They do not exist as immutable objects. They are recomposed each time. Their existence depends on our help and on our behavior⁸⁷².”

⁸⁶⁹ Giovanni Anselmo in "Tommaso Trini, “Anselmo, Penone,” quot., p. 62, my translation.

⁸⁷⁰ Germano Celant, *Arte povera, Notes for a guerrilla war*, reprinted in Germano Celant. *Arte povera. Storia e storie*, quot., p. 37.

⁸⁷¹ Giovanni Anselmo in *Arte povera*, Mazzotta, quot., p. 125

⁸⁷² Germano Celant, “Appunti per una Guerriglia”, quot., p. 5.

4.1.3. Giulio Paolini (1940)

The prominence of Untitled pieces throughout Giulio Paolini's *oeuvre* is notable. The artist addressed his view of authorship and titles in the only issue of the Italian magazine *Bartleby* in 2008, which was dedicated to the title Untitled and its multiple connotations, providing numerous interesting and unexpected theoretical thoughts. Here some abstracts particularly enlightening will be presented. Paolini, thinking about the Untitled title, clarified, at first, the very literal definition of the term title, according to a vocabulary:

Title, or 'dignity, degree that confers distinction, honor. Inscription under a statue, a painting, a sepulchre, a trophy. Denomination: the title of a work. Reason, right: based on which title...?⁸⁷³

His understanding of the role of title is based on its essentially etymological meaning: it allows someone to undertake a specific action by providing a framework within which to behave. Considering his temporal and cultural framework, Paolini recorded "the frequent ascription of contemporary works of art to widespread anonymity"⁸⁷⁴, due to, according to him the lack of commissions: artists do not receive the title – are not entitled – are not given the responsibility/task, to produce works: it follows a significant presence of the title Untitled. This interpretation of the title has no comparisons and is particularly original. Paolini's production is characterized by a significant presence of the title Untitled, especially during the early 1960s: they "document the absolute

⁸⁷³ "Nuovo Vocabolario Universale della Lingua Italiana", B. Melzi, VI edizione) in Giulio Paolini, "Senza titolo", in *Bartleby*, Gli Ori, 2008, p. 5.

⁸⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

abstention from any intention and the lack of connection between the different elements that make them up”⁸⁷⁵. Regarding the absence of intentionality Paolini spoke in the same essay of the capacity of an artist of creating, mostly actually consisting in the ability of “echoing”⁸⁷⁶ a work of art, as if he or she was not entitled to generate it or give it a shape. Giulio Paolini, on the occasion of his involvement into the present research, offered himself to elaborate a reflection on the title Untitled, still giving value to the notion of title as a qualification.

‘Without title’

The qualification of ‘Untitled’ – please allow me the play on words - seems to me instead to constitute a “Title of merit” for a work that renounces to speak out and to recall the reasons imposed by the author on the legitimate, constitutional, silence of the image. It was then, in 1961, my first intention to ‘strip’ the work of any interpretative directionality that the presence of a title might suggest, ‘not to alter the visual message’ - I declared at the time - to make it the most possible objective.⁸⁷⁷

The reflection on the title opens many issues, “hence the difficulty of maintaining the plan of inquiry in connection ‘only’ with this problem,

⁸⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷⁶ “The artist does not want to speak, communicate in direct form, in real time: he does not want to impose his voice but listen, catch an echo”, in *ibidem*.

⁸⁷⁷ “‘Senza titolo’ La qualifica di ‘Senza titolo’ – mi consenta il gioco di parole – mi sembra invece costituire un “Titolo di merito” per un’opera che rinunci a pronunciarsi e a richiamare le ragioni imposte dall’autore al legittimo, costituzionale silenzio dell’immagine. È di allora, del 1961, la mia prima intenzione di ‘spogliare’ l’opera da ogni direzionalità interpretativa che appunto la presenza di un titolo potrebbe suggerire, di ‘non alterare il messaggio visivo’ – dichiaravo all’epoca – di renderlo il più possibile oggettivo., Giulio Paolini, Torino, 14 giugno 2019”, transmitted via email to the author, my translation.

given the false solutions offered by tautology on one hand, and by the gratification of the witticism on the other”.⁸⁷⁸

In Giovanni Lista’s preface to his publication *Interviews* it is reported an affirmation by Giulio Paolini

the silent subject is art itself. Art, which, as it seems evident to me, does not communicate: rather, it has nothing else to communicate because it has already communicated its existence once and for all, even without giving us an explanation.⁸⁷⁹

In another interview, by Achille Bonito Oliva, the two spoke about the important of the project dimension:

Achille Bonito Oliva: ‘Can it be said that in your work the object identifies and corresponds with the project?’

Giulio Paolini: ‘Yes, in fact there is an attempt not to mystify the visual message, but to make it as objective as possible.’⁸⁸⁰

⁸⁷⁸ Giulio Paolini, in *Arte povera*, Mazzotta, reprinted in Germano Celant, *Arte povera, Storia e storie*, quot., p. 125

⁸⁷⁹ Il soggetto silenzioso è proprio l’arte. L’arte, che come a me pare evidente, non comunica: per meglio dire, non ha altro da comunicare perchè ci ha già comunicato, una volta per tutte, la sua esistenza, pur senza concederci una spiegazione”, translated by Chiara Ianeselli in Giovanni Lista, *quot.*, introduction.

⁸⁸⁰ “Achille Bonito Oliva: ‘Si può dire che nel tuo lavoro l’oggetto s’identifica e corrisponde con il progetto?’ Giulio Paolini: ‘Si, infatti c’è un tentativo di non mistificare il messaggio visivo, ma di renderlo il più possibile oggettivo.’ in Achille Bonito Oliva, *Dialoghi d’artista. Incontri con l’arte contemporanea*, Skira, 2008, p. 48, my translation.

4.2. Conclusions

The current study has resulted in a precise description of the many types of use of the untitled, Untitled as a title, which is a fundamental division. It has first resolved the discrepancy between the lack of a title (considered as an untitled title in this study) and the author's decision to leave the work Untitled (defined in the present research as an Untitled title). Indeed, this distinction is crucial, as the second scenario opens up a variety of possibilities for investigation.

In the first situation, more details are required because titles did not exist before the XVIII century, in the sense that they are now determined by the actual authors of the artworks. As a result, the title untitled can be explained by offering numerous reasons for the work's lack of a name. The work, for example, could be incomplete and hence stay untitled; it could also be that the work was never intended to be presented or was never exhibited. The research has, as a matter of fact, demonstrated that the affixing of a title usually takes place on the occasion of the exit of the work from the studio of the artist, on the occasion of an exhibition, the acquisition of a museum or of a private person. Another argument is that the work could be part of a bigger series of works with only one title and no titles for the individual pieces.

The title of the work may have been forgotten through time or not recorded on the canvas, or in inventories, leaving the work untitled. The study also revealed the difficulties of having multiple Untitled works; in fact, distinguishing them, especially if they are from the same year, is far more difficult. Furthermore, the involvement of many actors in the titling process has been documented. The deliberate choice of the author of leaving the work without title has been at the core of the study: the interest of Abstract Expressionists in the creative processes and in the

automatism of the working methods led them to deflect attention away from the titling processes. Pollock's disinterest (many of his titles were not his), Mark Rothko's, and Clyfford Still's disinterest reached such a high pitch that the final one even erased titles that had been assigned earlier throughout his career. Still's figure, in particular, may be considered a key figure, and his extraordinarily profound meditation on art and art experiences must be taken into account, as well as his influence on his contemporaries.

The title Untitled was used more frequently in the subsequent decades, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, in Minimalism and Arte Povera. In the second and third chapters, it is demonstrated how the Untitled title reflects highly diverse grounds in the use of artists from the two movements: Judd's Untitled and Kounellis' Untitled fundamentally vary. The artists, who were far more prolific in terms of writing and public exposure, deliberated deeply on the presentations of their works, frequently preferring not to verbally interfere with the works' fruition. Furthermore, the research has allowed for a deeper understanding of the context of key uses of the term Untitled, with a focus on exhibits and catalogues. The project has also illustrated how the Untitled title, untitled title is a problematic issue in today's exhibition of works, particularly in terms of label definition.

Appendix

4.3. Titling issues in artists affiliated with Abstract Expressionism

The following paragraphs are related to Chapter Second and connected to artists affiliated with Abstract Expressionism. It is extremely relevant that titles were subject of discussion among the artists in the group: in particular the publication *Artists' sessions at Studio 35*, edited by the painter Robert Goodnough, represents an extraordinary valuable source of information regarding the dialogues of the artists interacting in New York. These meetings took place from April 21 to April 23 in 1950. The title of the publication is derived from the street name where meetings and dialogues were held, 35 Eight East Street, New York. The artists present were William Baziotas, Janice Biala, Louise Bourgeois, James Brooks, Willem de Kooning, Jimmy Ernst, Herbert Ferber, Adolph Gottlieb, Peter Grippe, David Hare, Hans Hofmann, Weldon Kees, Abram Lassaw, Norman Lewis, Richard Lippold, Seymour Lipton, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Richard Pousette-Dart, Ad Reinhardt, Ralph Rosenborg, Theodoros Stamos, Hedda Sterne, David Smith and Bradley Walker Tomlin. They were moderated by different figures, such as Alfred H. Barr Jr. (the Director of collections of MoMA, from 1947 to 1967), Richard Lippold (a sculptor) and Robert Motherwell himself. They freely conversed discussing theoretical and practical aspects of producing artworks, often within a personal and intimate dimension. Their dialogues were apparently not edited, so that it is possible to record "the spontaneity, the unpreparedness, the rises and

falls of intensity and pointedness”⁸⁸¹. In one of these meetings, recorded in the book as the second day, the main focus was the titling practice. Although not the reflections of the artists present at the discussion will not be subject of the present study it is relevant to include the conversation as a whole, as it contains particularly interesting insights that expands significantly the implications of titling or not titling a work of art. The first day main discussion, moderated by Lippold, focused on the un-finished in modern and contemporary art; the second day discussion was specific about the issue of titling.

Hedda Sterne⁸⁸²: ‘I think that the titling of paintings is a problem. The titles a painter gives his paintings help to classify him, and this is wrong. A long poetic title or number...Whatever you do seems a statement of attitude. The same thing if you give a descriptive title...Even refraining from giving any at all creates a misunderstanding.’

Ad Reinhardt ⁸⁸³: ‘If a title does not mean anything and creates a misunderstanding, why put a title on a painting?’

⁸⁸¹ Robert Goodnough and Douglas MacAgy, *Modern artists in America*. First series, Wittenborn Schultz, 1951.

⁸⁸² “Artists' sessions at Studio 35” in Robert Goodnough, *Modern artists in America*, quot., The works of Hedda Sterne (1910 - 2011) dating from 1947 to 1950 have different titling categories such as descriptive titles as *Cafè*, 1944; *Chandelier*, 1945; a word plus a number as *Airport #1*, 1948; the Untitled title, and a word in parenthesis after Untitled, as *Untitled (Lunar Halo)*, c. 1950.

⁸⁸³ At the end of the 1940s Reinhardt used numbers to title his works, as for example in the case of *Number 22*, 1949, or in *Number 11*, 1949, as well as other titles, such as *Collage*, 1940 and also the Untitled title, as in *Untitled*, 1938.

James Brooks⁸⁸⁴: 'To me title is nothing but identification. I have a very hard time finding a title and it is always inadequate. I think when titles are very suggestive, they are a kind of a fraud, because they throw the spectator away from the picture rather than into it. But numbers are inadequate.'

Adolph Gottlieb⁸⁸⁵: 'I think the point Miss Sterne raised is inevitable. That is, whenever an artist puts a title on a painting some interpretation about his attitude will be made. It seems obvious that titles are necessary when everybody uses them - whether verbal or numbers; for purposes of exhibition, identification and the benefit of the critics there must be some way of referring to a picture. It seems to me that the artist, in making up titles for his pictures, must decide what his attitude is.'

Moderator Barr: 'Most people seem to think that titles are a kind of necessity. Does anyone think that titles have real usefulness in supplementing the object?'

Ralph Rosenborg⁸⁸⁶: 'The title is always arbitrary because we deal with unseen audiences; the reason for a title is that every Tom, Dick and Harry has to have some link. Once I had a show where I had numbers from one to twenty, and when it came to a question of reviewing, the critics found that number six was better than four, etc. I hope that the onlooker will make up his own title!'

⁸⁸⁴ James Brooks' (1906 - 1992) titles at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s include names, as in *Festival*, 1946 and number, as in *No.37*, 1951.

⁸⁸⁵ Adolph Gottlieb's (1903 - 1974) titles at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s include names, as in *Sorcerer*, 1948 and also the Untitled title, as in *Untitled (Voyage)*, 1948.

⁸⁸⁶ Ralph Rosenborg's (1913 - 1992) titles at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s include names, such as *The city*, 1952 and the Untitled title, as in *Untitled*, 1947.

Richard Pousette-Dart⁸⁸⁷: 'I think if we could agree on numbers it would be a tremendous thing. In music they don't have this dilemma. It would force people to just look at the object and try to find their own experience.'

Jimmy Ernst⁸⁸⁸: 'I would object to a picture. I don't particularly care what people classify me as, or whether people understand the title or not. It suggests something to me, or something may pop into my head- so I give it that title.'

David Smith⁸⁸⁹: 'I think titles are a positive means of identification. I never objected to any work of art because of its title. The only people who have objected were critics because they did not like the work.'

Ad Reinhardt: 'The question of abandoning titles arose, I am sure, because of aesthetic reasons. Even titles like "still life" and "landscape" do not say anything about a painting. If a painting does have a reference or association of some kind, I think the artist is apt to add a title. I think this is why titles are not used by a great many modern painters- because they don't have anything to do with the painting itself.'

Moderator Barr: 'There are some painters who attach a great deal of importance to titles.'

⁸⁸⁷ Richard Pousette-Dart's (1916 - 1992) titles at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s include names, such as *Number 11: A Presence* and the *Untitled*, as in *The Untitled*, 1948.

⁸⁸⁸ Jimmy Ernst (1920 - 1984) used mostly poetic titles.

⁸⁸⁹ David Smith (1906 - 1965) used mostly poetic titles for his sculptures and some *Untitled* title for his paintings.

Moderator Motherwell: 'I think Sterne is dealing with a real problem-what is the content of our work? What are we really doing? (The question is how to name what as yet has been unnamed.)

Moderator Barr: I would like to get some information on this. Would you raise your hands if you name your pictures and sculptures?'

[most raised their hands]

'How many people merely number their pictures?'

[three people raised their hands]

'How many don't title their pictures at all?'

[none raised their hands]

[Note: objections to this procedure]

David Hare⁸⁹⁰: 'It seems to me a minor problem. There are in general two kinds of title, poetic and those which note the content. A number seems to me only a refusal to accept responsibility.'

William Baziotēs⁸⁹¹: 'Whereas certain people start with a recollection or an experience and paint that experience, to some of us the act of doing it becomes the experience; so that we are not quite clear why we are engaged on a particular work. And because we are more interested in plastic matters than we are in a matter of words, one can begin a picture and carry it through and stop it and do nothing about the title at all. All pictures are full of association.'

Ad Reinhardt: 'Titles are very important in surrealist work. But the emphasis with us is upon a painting experience, and not on any other experience. The only objection I have to a title is when it is false or tricky, or it is something added that the painting itself does not have.'

⁸⁹⁰ David Hare (1917 - 1992) mostly used simple descriptive titles and poetic titles to identify the works.

⁸⁹¹ William Baziotēs (1912 - 1963) mostly used simple descriptive titles, the Untitled title and also titles such as *Composition*.

Sterne: 'I don't think anybody really has a right to know exactly how I feel about my paintings. It seems too intimate to give them a subjective title.'

Moderator Barr: 'Do you think it is possible to enrich the painting by words?'

Willem De Kooning: 'I think that if an artist can always title his picture, that means he is not always very clear.'

Ibram Lassaw⁸⁹²: 'In titling a construction, I have used combinations of words or syllables without any meaning. Lately, I have adopted the use of the names of stars or other celestial objects similar to the way ships are named. Such titles are just names, and are not to imply that the constructions express symbolize, or represent anything. A work of art is' like a work of nature.'

Herbert Ferber⁸⁹³ : 'What we all have been saying is that the designation of a painting or a piece of sculpture has become more important as a problem than it has been before. An Assumption or a Crucifixion needed no title. I think that numbering pieces is really begging the question. Because numbering the piece is an admission or a statement or a manifesto that this is pure painting or sculpture-that it stands by itself without relation to any other discipline. We should not cut ourselves off from this great rich world.'

Moderator Barr: 'I don't know how much longer this discussion of titling works will go on. There are a good many interesting implications. It seems to me there are three levels of titles: (1) Simply

⁸⁹² Ibram Lassaw (1913 - 2003) mostly used poetic titles.

⁸⁹³ Herbert Ferber (1906 - 1991) mostly used descriptive titles.

(2) Questions of titles as explanation or as a kind of fingerprint and which do not work particularly well. (3) The surrealist title in which the words are a positive part of the work of art, and there is an attraction or conflict set up between the words and the picture. It is the second of those that would like to hear some conversation about the question of specific emotion in the work of art. The general public factor of the work. How did the artist feel when he did the thing? Was it painful? Was it a matter of love or fear, or what not? Very often he gets no guidance at all from looking titles comes in. At the same time the title may distort the picture a great deal. But to return to the process of painting - how important is (whoever wants to answer) conscious emotion such as pleasure, grief or fear in making your work?'

Richard Pousette-Dart: 'I believe that a true work of art should not only be untitled, but I think it should be unsigned.'

Barnett Newman: 'I think it would be very well if we could title pictures by identifying the subject matter so that the audience could be helped. I think the question of titles is purely a social phenomenon. The story is the same when you can identify them. I think the implication has one of two possibilities: (1) We are not smart enough to identify our subject matter, or (2) language is so bankrupt that we can't use it. I think both, I think the possibility of finding language still exists, and I think we are smart enough. Perhaps we are arriving at a new state of painting where the thing has to be seen for itself.'

The discussion carries on in analysing in depth what is the subject of Abstract Expressionism, describing what feelings are conveyed, the relations with the public, the reasons for painting and the position of the artist within society – all these different parts are also expressed through the titles.

Moderator Lippold: 'I think we are getting away from the question-a description of the subject of the picture-especially Mr. Barr's question in relation to an emotional experience we might have felt.'

Moderator Barr: 'I don't want to have the discussion kept on a question of that sort, but I was interested really not in the question of title, but as to whether emotions such as grief or joy or pleasure or fear-how important are they consciously in the production of the works of art. Is the work of art an act of confidence or pleasure?'

Bourgeois: 'I try to analyse the reasons why an artist gets up and takes a brush and a knife-why does he do it? I feel it was either because he was suddenly afraid and wanted to fill a void, afraid of being depressed and ran away from it, or that he wanted to record a state of pleasure or confidence, which is contrary to the feeling of void or fear. My choice is made in my case, but I am not especially interested in talking about my own case.'

Brooks: 'It seems to me that it is impossible generally to clarify the emotions that go into painting. We can't get away from grief or joy we put into a painting; it is a very complex thing and in some cases a very ambiguous thing. We are in some cases identifying ourselves through our painting and that means everything we are and a great many things we would like to be.'

De Kooning: If you are an artist, the problem is to make a picture work whether you are happy or not.

Moderator Barr: 'Could you raise your hands to this question: How many people name their works of art after they are completed?'

[Thirteen raised hands to this question]

'How many people name their works when they are halfway through?'

[Six raised their hands to this]

'How many people have their work named before they start on it?'

[one person responded]

Note: Mr. Barr said the above was just a rough count of hands.

Moderator Lippold: 'It has seemed to me that the whole business of what to make of titles is a phenomenon peculiar to our times. The job was a great deal easier, in a period but our own. The idea of what to paint was already pre-determined. I am talking of such cultures as the oriental and our middle ages-in which a sculptor was asked to carve a king or queen. It wasn't his job to complain because he did not want to make a king or queen. And there are people like that now, too. I believe that in our own time the discipline that is enforced upon our work has to come ourselves. The title for me exists at the beginning and all through the piece, and it keeps me clearly on the road, I believe, to the conclusion of the work The only thing I am interested in resolving is that intent with which I begin, because I feel in our time there is very little else with which to begin. To grope through a series of accidents is not the function of the artist. The job of the artist is only the job of a craftsman.'⁸⁹⁴

As described in the first chapter the Untitled is often present in relation with unfinished works of art. Although it cannot be generalized for all the artists affiliated with Abstract Expressionism it is possible to note that many artworks were left unfinished and therefore not provided with a title.

Motherwell: 'How do you know when a work of art is finished?'

⁸⁹⁴ "Excerpts from Artists' Sessions at Studio 35" in Robert Goodnough, *Modern Artists in America*, quot, also mentioned in Ellen G. Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism. Context and Critique*, Yale University 2005, p. 160.

Gottlieb: 'Gottlieb: I usually ask my wife...I think a more interesting question would be, 'Why does anyone start a painting instead of finishing it?'

Newman: 'I think the idea of a finished picture is a fiction. I think a man spends his whole life-time painting one picture or working on one piece of sculpture.'

De Kooning: 'I refrain from 'finishing' it [...] I am not much interested in the question'.

Reinhardt: 'It has always been a problem for me – about 'finishing' paintings. I am very conscious of ways of 'finishing' a painting. Among modern artists there is a value upon 'unfinished' work.'

[...]

Motherwell: 'We are involved in 'process' and what is a 'finished' object is not so certain...'⁸⁹⁵

⁸⁹⁵ *Excerpts from Artists' Sessions at Studio 35*, quot.

4.4. Cases studies of the Untitled title

Through the research of several case studies, the paradoxical character of the title untitled in the label has to be further addressed. In the majority of the untitled work labels examined, no description or comment concerning the title is present. Without a doubt, the untitled title can be inconvenient on a management level because it is a non-univocal title; moreover, in this day of digital accessibility, it is a term that is unlikely to be explored. It's also worth noting that in all of the cases studied, no information regarding who wrote the label is available. The following is a selection of a few labels that address the presence of the unnamed title, either directly or indirectly.

The first case presented is Lee Krasner's *Untitled*⁸⁹⁶ work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Lee Krasner American, 1908-1984

Untitled, 1949, Oil on board

Gift of Alfonso A. Ossorio, 1969

Untitled is part of a late-1940s series called Little Images, none larger than three feet, that Krasner made on a table top in her bedroom. For this work she used repetitive strokes to apply thick paint, often squeezed straight from the tube. The composition is a grid like structure filled with Indecipherable marks. Krasner likened these symbols to Hebrew letters, which she had studied as a child but could no longer read or write. In any case, she said, she was interested in creating a language of private symbols that did not communicate any one specific meaning.

⁸⁹⁶ Object number: 500.1969, Copyright, © 2021 Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, MoMA

The Untitled title, which Lee Krasner often used, is not directly addressed in the label, that allows to understand that the artist intention was, in this work, “not communicate any one specific meaning”. Art historical research can prove, however, that titles were important to Krasner, as Meyers described:

She took a keen interest in how she titled her pictures, but like many artists she sometimes ran out of ideas as to what to call what. ‘Come for dinner’, she would say, ‘I’ve some new things I want you to see.’ And I knew we would be having a delicious and hilarious conversation about naming the latest work. In recent years this occurred twice, once in 1977 and then again in 1981. On each of these occasions she had completed a suite of large-scale collages. We would sit and stare at the work in her studio on 79th Street talking about each piece, ‘freely associating’ with the image before us to see if an arresting phrase or word would come forth. Sometimes this happened. Our first collaboration began in 1946, when I suggested the title *The Mouse Trap*⁸⁹⁷ for one of the ‘Little Image’ paintings.⁸⁹⁸

In the conversation Krasner discussed with Meyers the use of titles:

Lee Krasner: ‘It would be pleasant if we didn’t have to worry about which picture was which, and if, somehow, each piece of work found its name through the public, looking at it. However, the public is often not precise. Imagine a picture becoming known as ‘Whistler’s Mother’ if you were Whistler.’

⁸⁹⁷ The work to which Meyers is referring to is signed, titled and dated twice *The Mouse Trap* Lee Krasner 1949, (on the reverse), although its title is *Untitled (The Mouse Trap)*.

⁸⁹⁸ John Bernard Myers, “Naming Pictures: Conversations between Lee Krasner and John Bernard Myers”, in *Artforum*, Vol. 23, No. 3, November 1984.

JBM: 'The worry, then, at bottom, is identification and the confusions that can easily occur if an identification is vague or insufficient.'

LK: 'Or misleading. This is one of the problems brought about by titling with numbers, Arabic or Roman, or with letters, capital or lower case; confusion often erupts. The confusion can be confounded by clerical errors, incorrect file cards, look-alike photographs of closely related work, and false memory. Numbers and letters tend to create snarls, perhaps because they are so disembodied. But worse, suppose a large number of artists were to thus identify their work – let's not think of it. What a headache it would become!'

JBM: 'During the organization of Jackson Pollock's catalogue raisonné, a process that went on for many years, the editors had to keep their wits about them vigilantly to make certain number 10 was not number 23, and so on. Did you like Pollock's taste for utilizing numbers?'

LK: 'It would seem to be an ideal solution for abstract paintings to be abstractly titled. I am often tempted to do so, but do not, to avoid the perplexities already mentioned.'

JBM: 'Have you considered naming a canvas by naming the major color or colors?'

LK: 'If, as some scientists have argued, there exist over three million colors within the spectrum, most of them undetectable by the human eye, I suspect the results would be more vexing than ever.'

[...]

JBM: 'Don't you believe titles can be helpful to viewer and critic? To mention Pollock again, it seems to me many of his free-association titles are arresting and suggest clues for contemplation. The She-Wolf

[1943] for instance, and Lavender Mist [1950] both resonate in the mind.'

LK: 'I agree. I also think certain modern works are given more presence, more projection through their titles.'⁸⁹⁹

The title issue in Pollock's work is extremely complex, as discussed in chapter two, because multiple people were involved in the process. Similarly, in other labels, there are hints about why the works are Untitled, as in the case of a Donald Judd⁹⁰⁰'s piece, also at the New York Museum of Modern Art.

Donald Judd American, 1928-1994

Untitled 1967

Lacquer on galvanized iron Helen Acheson Bequest (by exchange) and gift of Joseph Heiman, 1997

Judd once wrote, 'The main virtue of geometric shapes is that they aren't organic, as all art otherwise is.' Untitled is made of rectangular metal boxes: a simple geometric form the artist favoured because he felt it carried no symbolic meaning.

Gallery label from 'Collection 1940s-1970s', 2019

The Untitled title is also viewed in this case as a strategy to avoid communicating symbolic significance, but the case of Judd is more complicated, as shown in chapter three, because the author was focused on a true re-naming of artworks, by the designation of the term *Specific Objects*, for example.

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁰⁰ Object number: 298.1997.a-1, credit line: Helen Acheson Bequest (by exchange) and gift of Joseph Helman, New York, Museum of Modern Art.

In most of the cases the label does not address the lack of a title, or the presence of the Untitled title or any similar variations, as with of Tanguy⁹⁰¹'s title unknown, which is a very rare and fascinating example, as artists affiliated with Surrealism always considered titles as fundamental parts of the works.

Title Unknown, 1926

Oil on canvas with string and collage

Yves Tanguy American

Tanguy's debt to the still and imaginative landscapes of the Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico is apparent in the perplexing array of imagery that includes a small school of fish and a child flattened by a cart. The plain white tower in the background – a favourite iconographic motif of de Chirico – secures the connection between the two artists.

On view at The Met Fifth Avenue in Gallery 901, 2019

The title in this case is very transparent: curators did not know or could not determine the title of the work of art, as it happened in other circumstances with Tanguy's work.

Particularly interesting is also the case of Eva Hesse's *No Title*⁹⁰²:

Eva Hesse

⁹⁰¹ Accession number 2002.456.6, Credit Line: The Pierre and Maria-Gaetana Matisse Collection, 2002, New York, Metropolitan Museum. The lacking of a title has various occurrences in Tanguy's case. The presentation of Title Unknown poses many issues on all the other works presented in the collection.

⁹⁰² Accession number 88.17a-b, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art.

No title
1969 -1970

On View at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Floor 6, 2019

No title might be apparently equated to an untitled title, but Hesse has expressed the desire of avoiding any just juxtaposition of words to a work of art.

I would like the work to be non-work. This means that it would find its way beyond my preconceptions. What I want of my art I can eventually find. The work must go beyond this.

The formal principles are understandable and understood.

It is the unknown quantity from which and where I want to go.

As a thing, an object, it accedes to its non-logical self.

It is something. It is nothing.⁹⁰³

The label of Robert Gober's, *Untitled*⁹⁰⁴, 1991, provides only the very basic information. An unsigned online description helps contextualizing the piece, but it does not address the fact that the work is Untitled.

Robert Gober's works often disrupt the normal relationship between our bodies and our everyday surroundings, unsettling us and evoking a sense of physical uncertainty. This untitled sculpture is meticulously crafted to be highly realistic, yet it is also disturbingly altered. The lifeless wax leg (modelled on Gober's own) that protrudes from the wall is fitted with hundreds of individual and actual hairs, lending it a profound sense of intimacy. The artist recalled its inspiration as a simple anecdote: "I was in this tiny little plane sitting next to this

⁹⁰³ Eva Hesse in Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York University Press, 1977, p. 131.

⁹⁰⁴ Accession Number: 92.6, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art.

handsome businessman, and his trousers were pulled above his socks, and I was transfixed in this moment by his leg.” The effect of encountering an inexplicably truncated body part in a museum context is not only jarring; it is also melancholy and, for Gober, deeply rooted in questions of mortality, specifically the AIDS crisis. While the phallic associations of the protruding candle are undeniable, the work also suggests a vigil, a sense of time passing and running out, and of bodies melting away.⁹⁰⁵

It becomes more and more interesting to then question why Gober has titled this piece *Untitled*, as in the descriptions so many references are present:

Craig Gholson: ‘Your earlier pieces were titled. All the sink pieces had titles to them. Gradually, you moved into calling them *Untitled*’.

Robert Gober: ‘There was a phase when the sinks were mutated and distorted. It felt very useful for me to give them poetic titles, because I could load up the information even more. But in certain instances, it seemed better to hold back and not direct people.’⁹⁰⁶

There are many variants of the *Untitled* title, as for example the “yet to be titled” or the “not titled yet”. *To Be Titled* represents a suspended state as the work is temporarily untitled and might get a title in the future, as for example Sarah Sze, (*not yet titled*),⁹⁰⁷ 2000 at the Whitney Museum of American Art: there is not any other information regarding the title, whether the work will be eventually titled or why is it so.

⁹⁰⁵ <https://whitney.org/collection/works/7987>, accessed on August 24, 2020.

⁹⁰⁶ Robert Gober by Craig Gholson, Interview, *Bomb Magazine*, published on October 1st, 1989, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/robert-gober/>, accessed on August 24, 2020.

⁹⁰⁷ Accession number: 2010.140. The work remains “not yet titled” as far as February 2021.

The Tate website, in the page presenting works from the collections, also includes sometimes the gallery label, with the date in which it was written, followed by this note: “Does this text contain inaccurate information or language that you feel we should improve or change? We would like to hear from you”. Though, it is not clear why sometimes the label is present, why sometimes there is only the online caption, why sometimes there is none.

One interesting example is the gallery label of Rothko’s *Untitled*⁹⁰⁸, which could be described as a highly suggestive, evocative kind of label, but there is no reflection on the title.

Mark Rothko
Untitled
c.1950–2
Oil paint on canvas
Dimensions cm 190 × 101
Collection Tate

The label reads

In his mature work, Rothko abandoned specific reference to nature in order to paint images with universal associations. By the late 1940s he had developed a style in which hazy, luminous rectangles float within a vertical format. Rothko wrote that the great artistic achievements of the past were pictures of the human figure alone in a moment of utter immobility. He sought to create his own version of this solitary meditative experience, scaling his pictures so that the viewer is enveloped in their subtly shifting, atmospheric surface.

⁹⁰⁸ Reference code: T04148, Tate Modern.

Another interesting example is Cindy Sherman's work, indeed, almost her entire production, also considering the title *Untitled film stills*, is characterized by the term *Untitled*.

Cindy Sherman
Untitled A
cm 41,4 x 28,3
1975

The caption does not provide any information on why the works are titled *Untitled*. In reference to the definition of her work she declared: "I don't want to have to explain myself. The work is what it is and hopefully it's seen as feminist work, or feminist-adjacent work, but I'm not going to go around espousing theoretical bullshit about feminist stuff"⁹⁰⁹.

She also reflected on the role of art criticism played in approaching her work:

Cindy Sherman: '[...] I would read theoretical stuff about my work and think, 'What? Where did they get that?' The work was so intuitive for me, I didn't know where it was coming from. So I thought I had better not say anything or I'd blow it.'

Betsy Berne: 'Do you think viewers like a challenge or prefer to be told what to think?'

Cindy Sherman: 'You know what? I don't really care.'⁹¹⁰

⁹⁰⁹ Betsy Berne, "Studio: Cindy Sherman", interview, online, Tate Website 1 June 1, 2003.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/cindy-sherman-1938/studio-cindy-sherman>.

⁹¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

An interesting project regarding Untitled works was performed by Ivan Moudov. His works aims to subvert rules and fixed, defined activities of the society. In his project, Certificate of Name Giving (Centre Pompidou collection)", 2014, 98 Prints on paper he assigned names to untitled works of art in the collection of the Centre Pompidou, Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova and MSUM, The Guangdong Museum of Art, Zhejiang Art Museum and New York MoMA. Various artists, such as Jason Dodge, have experimented with the act of not labeling and supplying the viewer with no information.

Bibliography

Adams, Hazard. "Titles, Titling, and Entitlement to", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Autumn 1987

Adorno, Theodor W. "Titles. Paraphrases on Lessing", in *Notes to literature*, Vol. II, Columbia University Press, 1992

Albright, Thomas. "Having Lunch With a Legend", in *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 8, 1976

Albright, Thomas. "A Conversation with Clyfford Still", in *Artnews*, No. 75, March 1976

Alley, Ronald. *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery's collection of modern art other than works by British artists*, Tate Gallery and Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1981

Alloway, Lawrence. *Jackson Pollock. Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors from the Collection of Lee Krasner Pollock*, exh. cat., June 1951, London, Marlborough, Fine Art, 1951

Alloway, Lawrence. *Systemic Painting*, exh. cat., September 24 - November 27, 1966, New York, Guggenheim Museum, 1966

Alloway, Lawrence. "Two Quotations", in *Art Forum*, Vol. 11, No. 8, April 1973

Andina, Tiziana. *Filosofie dell'arte. Da Hegel a Danto*, Carocci Editore, 2019

Andreae, Christopher. *Untitled*, in *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 2, 1970

Anfam, David. *Clyfford Still*, Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD, University of London at the Courtauld Institute of Art, 1984

Anfam, David. "Of the Earth, the Damned, and of the Recreated: Aspects of Clyfford Still's Earlier Work" in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 135, No. 1081, April 1993

Anfam, David. "Clyfford Still's Art: Between the Quick and the Dead", in *Clyfford Still: Paintings, 1944-1960*, exh. cat., Jun 20 - Sep 16, 2001, Hirshhorn Museum, edited by James T. Demetron, Yale University Press, 2002

Anfam, David. *Mark Rothko, The Works on Canvas*, Catalogue Raisonné, Yale University Press in association with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2016

Anselmo, Giovanni. "Giovanni Anselmo" in *DATA, Dati internazionali d'arte*, 1972, II, No. 2

Ashton, Dore. "Premiere Exhibition for Agnes Martin", in *The New York Times*, December 6, 1958

Ashton, Dore. *The Unknown Shore. A View of Contemporary Art*, Little, Brown & Co, Boston, 1962

Barker, Walter. "A Closer Look at Mark Rothko, in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 29, 1970

Barnes, Lucinda. *Hans Hofmann: the Nature of Abstraction*, University of California Press, 2019

Barr, Alfred H. Jr. and Miller, Dorothy C. *XXVth Anniversary Exhibition: Paintings from the Museum Collection*, exh. cat., October 19, 1954 - February 6, 1955, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955

Barr, Alfred H. *The New American Painting, as shown in eight European countries, 1958-1959*, exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1959

Barr, Alfred H. *The New American Painting*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Press Release, 1959

Battcock, Gregory. *Minimal Art*, University of California Press, 1995

Baxandall, Michael. "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects", in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Karp, Ivan and Lavine, Steven D. Washington, D. C., Smithsonian Institution, 1991

Bear, Donald. "Rothko's Paintings High in Interest But Far from Easy to Analyze", in *Santa Barbara News Press*, September 29, 1946

Bennett, Will. "Widow ends fight for 'gift' from Pollock", in *The Telegraph*, November 29, 2000, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1376093/Widow-ends-fight-for-gift-from-Pollock.html>, accessed on May 20, 2020

Bernardi, Marziano. "Un'ampia mostra a Torino. Sconcertante Arte Povera, in *La Stampa*, June 13, 1970

Berne, Betsy. "Studio: Cindy Sherman", interview, online, Tate Website 1 June 1, 2003, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/cindy-sherman-1938/studio-cindy-sherman>, accessed on May 12, 2020

Bernheimer, Richard. *The Nature of Representation a Phenomenological Inquiry*, New York University, 1961

Bersani, Leo and Druot, Ulysse. *Arts of Impoverishment. Beckett, Rothko, Resnais*, Harvard University, 1993

Bloem, Marja. "An Awareness of Perfection", in *Agnes Martin: Paintings and Drawings 1974 - 1990*, exh. cat., Stedelijk Museum, 1991

Bochner, Mel. "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism" in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: a critical anthology*, University of California, 1995

Boehm, Gottfried. "Die Bilderfrage", in *Was ist ein Bild?*, Munich, 1994

Boehm, Gottfried. "Jenseits der Sprache? Anmerkungen zur Logik der Bilder", in *Iconic Turn: die neue Macht der Bilder*. Köln edited by Burda, Hubert, Maar, 2004

Boehm, Gottfried. *Bildbeschreibung. Über die Grenzen von Bild und Sprache*, edited by Pfothenauer 1995, reprinted in Gottfried Boehm, *La svolta iconica*, edited by Maria Giuseppina Di Monte and Michele di Monte, Meltemi, 2009

Bois, Yve-Alain and Repensek, Thomas. "Ryman's Tact", in *October*, Vol. 19 Winter, 1981

Bonito Oliva, Achille. *Dialoghi d'artista. Incontri con l'arte contemporanea*, Skira, 2008

Breton, André. *Surrealism*, the English catalogue, 1939

Breslin, James E. B. *Mark Rothko, a Biography*, University of Chicago, 1998

Burnham, Jack. "Duchamp's Bride Stripped Bare: The Meaning of the Large Glass", in *The Great Western Salt Works: Essays on the Meaning of Post-Formalist Art*, New York, George Braziller, 1974

Cabassi, Valentina. *La rinuncia al titolo. Il fenomeno del Senza titolo in arte contemporanea*, MA Thesis, University of Ca Foscari, 2011 - 2012

Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Wesleyan University, 1961

Calas, Nicolas. "Subject Matter in the Work of Barnett Newman", in *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 42, No. 10, June 1967

Calvesi, Maurizio. "Una Biennale sottosviluppata" in *L'Espresso*, Roma, 7 luglio 1968

Cameron, Dan. "Anxiety of Influence", in *Flash Art International*, No. 164, May - June 1992

Cameron, Dan. "Is Arte Povera American?" published in *Flash Art*, May 24th, 2017, <https://flash---art.it/article/larte-povera-e-americana/>, accessed on September 10, 2020

Carrier, David. "Gombrich on Art Historical Explanations", in *Leonardo*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Spring 1983

Carroll, Lewis. *Through the Looking-Glass And What Alice Found There*, Macmillan Publishers, 1871

Celant, Germano. "Arte povera. Appunti per una guerriglia", in *Flash Art*, No. 5, Rome, November - December 1967

Celant, Germano. *Arte povera*, Edizioni Galleria De Foscherari, Bologna, 1968

Celant, Germano. "Per una critica acritica", in *NAC Notiziario Arte Contemporanea*, October 1, 1970

Celant, Germano. *Arte povera, Storie e protagonisti*, Electa, 1985

Chastel, Andre. Untitled, in *Le Monde*, Paris, January 17, 1959

Chave, Anna C. "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power", in *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 64, No. 5, January 1990

Chelnieque, M. G. "La Kunsthalle ne doit pas servir de foire aux expériences douteuses", in *L'Express*, May 19, 1969

Christov-Bakargiev, Carolyn. *Arte povera*, Phaidon Press, 2005

Ciaccheri, Maria Chiara et al., *Senza Titolo. Le Metafore della Didascalìa*, Nomos Edizioni, 2020

Coates, Robert M. "The Art Galleries: Situation Well in Hand", in *The New Yorker*, November 20, 1943

Coates, Robert M. "The Art Galleries: Extremists", in *The New Yorker*, December 9, 1950

Collier, Oscar. "Mark Rothko", in *The New Iconograph*, No. 4, Fall 1947

Colt, Priscilla. "Notes on Ad Reinhardt", in *Art International*, vol. VIII, No. 8, October 20, 1964

Coates, Robert M. "The Art Galleries" in *The New Yorker*, March 30, 1946

Coates, Robert M. "The Art Galleries: Edward Hopper and Jackson Pollock", in *The New Yorker*, January 17, 1947

Coates, Robert M. "Reviews", in *The New Yorker*, December 3, 1949

Colpitt, Frances. *The Minimal Art: A Critical Perspective*, University of Washington, 1990

Cooper, Douglas. Untitled, in *The Listener*, July 6, 1950

Cotter, Holland. "Like Her Paintings, Quiet, Unchanging and Revered" in *The New York Times*, January 19, 1997

Craig-Martin, Michael. "The art of context", in *Minimalism: What you see is what you see*, exh. cat., March 22, 1989 - 1 February 1, 1990, Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1990
Creg, Gail, 'Your Labels Make Me Feel Stupid', in *Artnews*, July 1, 2010, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/your-labels-make-me-feel-stupid-319/>, accessed on January 10, 2020

Crimp, Douglas. "New York Letter", in *Art International*, No. 17, April 1973

Davidson, Susan and Rylands, Philip and Sharp, Jasper. *Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler: the story of art of this century*, Hatje Cantz, 2005

Danto, Arthur. *Transfiguration of a Common Place. A Philosophy of Art*, Harvard University, 1981

De Kooning, Elaine. Oral history interview, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, August 27, 1981

Delehanty, Suzanne. *Agnes Martin*, exh. cat., Jan 22 - Mar 1, 1973, ICA, 1973

Devree, Howard. "Among the New Exhibitions", in *The New York Times*, March 25, 1945

Devree, Howard. "New Directions. Current Shows Reveal Steady Expansion Of Modern Movement's Horizons", in *The New York Times*, January 8, 1950

Diacono, Mario. *KA. Da Kounellis ad Aconci. Arte materia concetto, 1960 - 1975*, Postmediabooks, 2016

Di Monte, M. G. *Immagine e Scrittura*, Roma, Meltemi, 2006

Dragone, Angelo. "Gli Artisti d'Avanguardia a Torino. Sculture con altoparlanti e lampade al neon", in *La Stampa Sera*, February 21, 1969

Dubos, Jean-Baptiste. *Réflexions critiques sur l'apoésie et sur la peinture*, Paris, Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux arts, 1993

Duchesne, Henri-Gabriel, and Macquer, Pierre-Joseph. *Manuel du naturalist, Ouvrage dédié à M. de Buffon*, Paris, G. Desprez, 1771

Efferman, James A. W. "Speaking for Pictures, "The rhetoric of art criticism", in *Word & Image, A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, Volume 15, Issue 1, 1999

Evremond, St. Editorial, in *Art Voices*, January 1964

- Feaver, William. "Art: In Contrast," in *The Observer*, March 6, 1977
- Ferber, Herbert. "Interview by Phyllis Tuchman" on June 2, 1981, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
- Fisher, John. "Entitling", in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 11, No. 2, University of Chicago, December 1984
- Flavin, Dan. "Some other comments", in *Artforum*, Vol. 8, No. 4, December 1967
- Foster, Hal. "The Crux of Minimalism", in *The return of the real: the avant-garde at the end of the century*, MIT, 1996
- Foster, Hal et al. *Art Since 1900, Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Thames and Hudson, 2016
- Foucault, Michel. "Ceci n'est pas une pipe", in *October*, No. 1, 1976
- Gehlen, Arnold. *Zeit-Bilder – Zur Soziologie und Ästhetik Moderner Malerei*, Frankfurt, 1960
- Genauer, Emily. "The Week in Art", in *The New York World - Telegram*, February 7, 1949
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation*, Cambridge, 1997
- Giacobbe, Luisa. "Minimalismo americano e arte italiana delle 'Nuove Strutture' alla XXXIV Biennale d'arte di Venezia", in *Ricerche di Storia dell'arte*, No. 98, 2009
- Glaser, Bruce. "Questions To Stella And Judd", interview, edited By Lucy R. Lippard, published in *Art News*, September 1966, in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, University Of California, 1968
- Glimcher, Arne. *Agnes Martin: Paintings, Writings, Remembrances*, Phaidon, 2012
- Glueck, Grace. "Art Notes: A Box Is a Box Is a Box", in *The New York Times*, March 10, 1968
- Gober, Robert. "Interview", by Gholson, Craig, in *Bomb Magazine*, published on October 1st, 1989, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/robert-gober/>, accessed on August 24, 2020
- Goldin, John. *Paths to the Absolute. Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still*, Thames & Hudson, 2000
- Goldie, Peter and Schellekens, Elisabeth. *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, Oxford University, 2007

Gombrich, Ernst. *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Phaidon, 1960

Goodman, Nelson. *The Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, The Bobbs Merrill Company, 1968

Goodnough, Robert. "Pollock Paints a Picture", in *Art News*, No. 3, May 1951

Goodnough, Robert. "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35" in *Modern Artists in America*, Wittenborn Schultz, 1951

Goossen, Eugene. *The Art of the Real: U.S.A. 1948-1969*, exh. cat., July 3 - September 8, 1968, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1968

Greenberg, Clement. "Art", in *The Nation*, No. 22, November 27, 1943

Greenberg, Clement. "Art", in *The Nation*, No. 5, February 1, 1947

Greenberg, Clement. "Art", in *The Nation*, No. 168, February 19, 1949

Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture, Critical Essays*, Beacon Press, 1965

Greenberg, Clement. "Towards a Newer Laocoön", 1940 reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, edited by John O'Brian, University of Chicago Press, 1986

Grigely, Joseph. *Textualterity: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism*, University of Michigan Press, 1995

Grossberg, Jacob. "In the Galleries", in *Arts Magazine*, January 1965

Gruen, John. "Agnes Martin," in *The Artist Observed: 28 Interviews with Contemporary Artists*, A Cappella Books, 1991

Hartford, Huntington. "The Public Be Damned", in *The American Mercury*, March 1955

Haskell, Barbara; Chave, Anne; Krauss, Rosalind E., *Agnes Martin*, exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (November 6, 1992 - January 31, 1993); Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin, USA (February 12 - April 4, 1993); Center for the Fine Arts, Miami, Florida (May 22 - August 1, 1993); Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas (September 10 - October 31, 1993), Whitney Museum of American Art, H. N. Abrams, 1993

Havens, Erin. *Minimalism and Meaning-Making: The Self-Referentialism of Frank Stella's Black Paintings*, edited by Gabby Marcuzzie Herie, online <https://www.canvasjournal.ca/blog/minimalism-and-meaning-making-the-self-referentialism-of-frank-stellas-black-paintings>, accessed on February 4, 2020

Heffernan, James A. W. "Resemblance, Signification and Metaphor in the Visual Arts", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 44, No. 2 Winter, 1985

Hein, George E. *Learning in the Museum*. London, Routledge, 1998

Hess, Thomas B. *Willem de Kooning*, New York, G. Braziller, 1959

Hobbs, Robert. "Frank Stella, Then and Now," in *Frank Stella: Recent Work*, exh. cat., Singapore Tyler Print Institute, 2002

Hollander, John. "'Haddock's Eyes': A Note on Theory of Titles," in *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form*, Oxford University, 1975

Homem, Rui Carvalho and Lambert, Maria de Fátima. *Writing and Seeing Essays on Word and Image*, Rodopi, 2006

Horn, Roni. In conversation with the MoMA curator Ann Temkin about Donald Judd, "Pair Object: Roni Horn and Donald Judd", in *MoMA Magazine*, Apr 23, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/292>, accessed on August 22, 2020

Horsfield, Kate. "On Art and Artists: Agnes Martin '74", in *Profile*, March 1981

Hoskin, Dawn. *Writing Labels & Gallery Text*, Victoria and Albert Museum, October 31, 2013 <https://bit.ly/3ocAt60>, accessed on January 21, 2020

Hudson, Suzanne Perling. *Robert Ryman: used paint*, MIT, 2007

Hulme, T. E. and Read, Herbert. *Speculations; essays on humanism and the philosophy of art*, London, K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.; New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc., 1924

Hudson, Suzanne P. *Agnes Martin: Night Sea*, Afterall, 2017

Hunter, Sam. "Diverse Modernism", in *The New York Times*, March 14, 1948

Hunter, Sam. *Jackson Pollock*, exh. cat., December 19, 1956 - February 3, 1957, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1957

Hunter, Sam. "Among the New Shows", in *The New York Times*, January 30, 1949

Janis, Sidney. *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944

Jensen, Alfred. *Coversazioni con Rothko*, curated by Venturi, Riccardo, Donzelli, 2008

Jewell, Edward Alden. "Globalism Pops into View", in *The New York Times*, June 13, 1943

Jewell, Edward Alden. "Art: Briefer Mention" in *The New York Times*, November 14, 1943

Jewell, Edward Alden. "Towards Abstract or Away", in *The New York Times*, July 1, 1945

Jewell, Edward Alden. "A Problem for Critics", in *The New York Times*, July 1, 1945

Judd, Donald. "Nationwide Reports: Hartford", in *Arts Magazine*, March 1964

Judd, Donald. *Complete Writings 1959 - 1975, Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statement, Complaints*, Judd Foundation, 1975, reprinted in 2005

Judd, Donald. *Interviews*, edited by Flavin, Judd, Murray, Caitlin, Judd Foundation, Zwirner Books, 2019

Karmel, Pepe. *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999

Kellein, Thomas. *Clyfford Still, 1904 - 1980: The Buffalo and San Francisco Collections*, Prestel, 1992

Kellman, Steven G. "Dropping Names: The Poetics of Titles", in *Criticism*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Wayne State University, Spring 1975

Kim, Sukmo. *Bildtitel, Eine Kunstgeschichte des Bildtitels*, Verlag Dr. Kovac, Hamburg, 2015

Kimmelman, Michael. "Art View: Nature's Mystical Poetry, Written in Paint" in *The New York Times*, November 15, 1992

Kounellis, Jannis. "Tecniche e materiali", interview by Marisa Volpi, *Marcatré*, No. 37 - 40, May 1968

Kounellis, Jannis. "Untitled", interview by Bruno Corà in *Jannis Kounellis, exhibition catalogue* Paris, ARC, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1980

Kounellis, Jannis. *Jannis Kounellis*, exh. cat., July 16 - September 30, 1983, curated by Celant, Germano, Musei di Rimini, Musei Comunali, 1983

Kounellis, Jannis. "Il piacere di giocare e il piacere di incontrare degli uomini...", in *Domus*, No. 650, May, 1984

Kounellis, Jannis. "Interview with Franco Fanelli", in *Il Giornale dell'Arte*, No. 24, January 1989

- Kounellis, Jannis. "Le parole per dirmi" in *L'Espresso*, August 1, 1996
- Kounellis, Jannis. *Jannis Kounellis: Works, Writings 1985 – 2000*, edited by Moure. Gloria, Barcelona, 2001
- Kounellis, Jannis. *Echoes in the Darkness, Writings and Interviews 1966-2012*, edited by Codognato, Mario and D'Argenzio, Mirta, Trolley, 2002
- Kramer, Hilton. "An Art of Boredom?" in *The New York Times*, June 6, 1966
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd", in *Artforum*, Vol. 4, No. 9, May 1966
- Krauss, Rosalind. "LeWitt in progress", in *October*, No. 6, 1978
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Reading Jackson Pollock, Abstractly", in *Originality*, 1982
- Krauss, Rosalind. "The Grid / The Cloud / and the Detail", in *The Presence of Mies*, Princeton Architectural, 1994
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome", in *October*, Vol. 124, Postwar Italian Art, Spring, 2008
- Kray, Thorn-R. "Nothing Left to See. Arnold Gehlen on Why Contemporary Art Needs Commentary", in *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, Felix Meiner Verlag Hamburg, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2015
- Kuh, Katharine. "Mark Rothko", in *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 4, November 15, 1954
- Kuh, Katharine. "Foreword", in *Clyfford Still-Thirty-three Paintings in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery*, Buffalo, 1966
- Kuh, Katharine. "Clyfford Still, the Enigma", in *Vogue*, No.1, February 1970
- Kuh, Katharine. "Clyfford Still", in *Clyfford Still*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, edited by John P. O'Neill, Harry N. Abrams, 1979
- Kuh, Katharine. "Cantankerous Clyfford Still's Palette of Green and Black", in *Washington Post*, June 15, 2001
- Kuspit, Donald B. "Clyfford Still: The Ethics of Art", in *Artforum*, Vol. 15, No. 9, May 1977
- L.A. "Still's Legerdarmain" in *The Art Digest*, March 1947, in Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Betty Parsons Papers
- Landau, Ellen G. *Reading Abstract Expressionism. Context and Critique*, Yale University, 2005

- Levin, Harry. "The Title as a Literary Genre", in *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 72, No. 4, Modern Humanities Research Association, October 1977
- Levin, Kim. "Agnes Martin's Gridlock", in *The Village Voice*, December 1980
- Levinson, Jerrold. "Titles", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Autumn 1985
- LeWitt, Sol. "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", in *Artforum*, Vol. 5, No. 10, June 1967
- Lippard, Lucy. "New York Letter", in *Art International*, March 1965
- Lippard, Lucy. "After a fashion – a group show", in *The Hudson Review*, Vol. XIX, Winter 66-67, 1966
- Lippard, Lucy. "The silent Art", in *Art in America*, 1967
- Lippard, Lucy. *Eva Hesse*, New York University Press, 1977
- Lippard, Lucy. *Ad Reinhardt*, H. N. Abrams, 1981
- Lista, Giovanni. *Arte Povera, Abscondita*, 2011
- Lloyd, Michael and Desmond, Michael. *European and American Paintings and Sculptures 1870 - 1970 in the Australian National Gallery*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1992
- Lonzi, Carla. *Autoritratto*, et al., 2010
- Marie, Annika. "Ad Reinhardt: Mystic or Materialist, Priest or Proletarian?" in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 96, No. 4, December 2014
- Martin, Agnes. "Letter to Virginia Dwan", dated September 1972, in Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Dwan Gallery records, 1959 - c.1982
- Martin, Agnes. *Agnes Martin: Writings*, edited by Dieter Schwarz, Cantz, 1991
- Martin, Agnes. "Agnes Martin interviewed by Irving Sandler", in *Art Monthly*, Issue 169, September 1993
- Martin, Agnes. *The Nineties and Beyond*, 2002, exh. cat., February 1 - May 26, 2002, edited by Ned Rifkin, Houston, The Menil Collection, 2002
- Martin, Agnes. *Agnes Martin*, exh. cat., December 13, 2008 - March 26, 2017, edited by Anastas, Rhea et al., New York, Dia Art Foundation, Yale University Press, 2011

- Martin, F. David. "Naming Paintings", in *Art Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Spring, 1966
- Matisse, Henri. "Notes of a painter", in Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, Dutton, 1978
- McEvelley, Thomas. "Grey Geese Descending: The Art Of Agnes Martin. Lines Of Feeling", in *Artforum*, Vol. 25, No. 10, Summer 1987
- McShine, Kynaston. "More than Black", in *Arts Magazine*, December 1967
- Meyer, James. *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, Yale University, 2001
- Michelson, Annette. "Agnes Martin: Recent Paintings", in *Artforum*, Vol. 5, No. 5, January, 1967
- Michelson, Annette. "Morris, An Aesthetics of Transgression", in Julia Bryan-Wilson, *October Files*, No. 15, MIT, 2013
- Miller, Dorothy C. *The new American painting, as shown in eight European countries, 1958-1959*, exh. cat., organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art, MoMA, 1959
- Mitchell, Matt. "Fine Art Has Its Own Meaning", in *The Register-Guard*, 1963
- Mitchell, W.J.T. "The Pictorial Turn", in *Artforum*, Vol. 30, No. 7, March 1992
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory*, Chicago Press, 1994
- Mitchell, W.J.T. "Wall Labels: Word, Image, and Object in the Work of Robert Morris," in *Robert Morris. The Mind/Body Problem*, exh. cat., 1994
- Mocsanyi, Paul. "Jackson Pollock", in *United Press Red Letter*, February 9, 1949
- Mocsanyi, Paul. "Art in Review," in *United Press Red Letter*, May 14 - 15, 1951
- Morris, Robert. *Robert Morris*, exh. cat., April 9 - May 31, 1970, curated by Marcia Tucker, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970
- Morris, Robert. *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, MIT Press, 1993
- Morris, Robert. *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, exh. cat., 1994, Guggenheim Museum, 1994
- Morris, Robert. *Oral history interview with Robert Morris*, by Kitto, Svetlana. April 19-20, 2018 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
- Moure, Gloria. "Jannis Kounellis, Configuration as Resistance", in *Jannis Kounellis, 20_21* Collection, Ediciones Poligrafa, Barcelona, 2001

Myers, John Bernard. "Naming Pictures: Conversations between Lee Krasner and John Bernard Myers", in *Artforum*, Vol. 23, No. 3, November 1984

O'Connor, Francis Valentine and Thaw, Eugene Victor. *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings and Other Works*, Yale University Press, 1978

O'Doherty, Brian. "Recent Openings", in *The New York Times*, December 21, 1964

O'Doherty, Brian. "The Anti Matter", in *Arts and Artists*, Bol.1, January 1967

O'Neill, John Philip. *Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., November 17 1979 - February 3, 1980, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, H. N. Abrams, 1979

Orozco, Gabriel. *Gabriel Orozco*, Press Release, New York, Museum of Modern Art, June 17, 1940

Palazzoli, Daniela. *Con temp l'azione*, exh. cat., 4 December, 1967 - February 17, 1968, Gallerie Christian Stein, Galleria Il Punto, Galleria Sperone, 1968

Paolini, Giulio. "Senza titolo", in *Bartleby*, Gli Ori, 2008

Parsons, Betty. *Letter to Clyfford Still*, March 8, 1947, Archives of American Art, Betty Parsons Papers

Pinkus, Karen. "Dematerialization: From Arte Povera to Cybermoney through Italian Thought", in *Diacritics*, Fall 2009, Vol. 39, No. 3, Contemporary Italian Thought, 2009

Plessix du, Francin. 'Ossorio the Magnificent', in *Art in America*, Voll.55, No. 2, March - April 1967

Pollock, Jackson. "My painting" in *Possibilities I*, Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947

Pollock, Jackson. *Initial exhibition*, exh. cat., October 5 - October 31, David Ferbert Gallery, 1959

Potter, Jeffrey. *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock*, Pushcart Press, 1987

Potts, Alex. "Disencumbered Objects" , in *October*, Vol. 124, Spring 2008

Preston, Stuart. "Mark Rothko, Purity", in *The New York Times*, April 2, 1951

Preston, Stuart. "Ringing Changes on the Contemporary Scene", in *The New York Times*, November 24, 1963

Putzel, Howard. "A Problem for Critics" in Edward Alden Jewell, "Towards Abstract or Away", in *The New York Times*, July 1, 1945

Reinhardt, Ad. *Ad Reinhardt*, exh. cat., November 24 - December 13, 1947, Betty Parsons, 1947

Reinhardt, Ad. *Ad Reinhardt*, exh. cat., October 18 - November 6, 1948, Betty Parsons, 1948

Reinhardt, Ad. *Ad Reinhardt*, exh. cat., October 31 - November 19 1949, Betty Parsons, 1949

Reinhardt, Ad. *An interview by Harlan Phillips*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, circa 1964

Reinhardt, Ad. untitled, in *Newsweek*, March 15, 1965

Reinhardt, Ad. "Reinhardt paints a picture. Auto-interview", in *Art News*, March 1965

Reinhardt, Ad. "An Interview with Bruce Glaser," in *International*, No. 10, December 20, 1966

Reinhardt, Ad. *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, University of California, 1975

Reinhardt, Ad. *Ad Reinhardt, a Concentration of Works from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art: A 50th Anniversary Exhibition*, exh. cat., December 10, 1980 - February 8, 1981, Whitney Museum, 1980

Reinhardt, Ad and Bois, Yve-Alain. "The Limit of Almost," in *Ad Reinhardt*, exh. cat., June 1 - September 2, 1991, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1991

Restany, Pierre. "Povertà dell'arte povera", in *Il Corriere della Sera*, June 15, 1969

Riley, Maude. "Fifty-Seventh Street in Review: Explosive First Show", in *The Art Digest*, 13, No. 4, November 15, 1943

Riley, Maude. "35 American Painters of Today", in *Bulletin of the Associates in Fine Arts at Yale University*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 35, February 1950

Rinaldi, Rosamaria. "Quando la natura fioriva", in *DATA, Dati internazionali d'arte*, VIII, No. 32, 1968

Ritchie, Andrew C. *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*, exh. cat., January 23 - March 25, 1951, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951

Roberts, Lisa C. *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D. C., 1997

Robinson, Amy. "Jackson Pollock", in *Art News*, No. 48, December 1949

Romdan, Selden. "Interview with Jackson Pollock", in *Conversations with Artists*, Devin-Adair, 1957

Roppola, Tiina. *Designing for the Museum Visitor Experience*, Routledge, New York, 2014

Rorty, Richard. *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, Chicago University, 1967

Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University, 1979

Rose, Barbara. "New York Letter", in *Art International*, No., 8, Summer 1964

Rose, Barbara. "ABC Art", in *Art in America*, October/November 1965

Rose, Barbara. *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, University of California, 1991

Rosenberg, Harold. "American Action Painters", in *Art News*, Vol. 51, December 1952

Ross, Clifford. *Abstract expressionism: creators and critics*, H. N. Abrams, New York, 1990

Rothko, Christopher. *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out*, Yale University, 2015, Kindle Edition

Rothko, Mark. "The Romantics Were Prompted", in *Possibilities I*, Winter 1947-8

Rothko, Mark. *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art by Rothko*, Yale University, 2006

Rothko, Mark. *Writings on Art*, edited by M. López-Remiro, Yale University, 2006

Roueché, Barton. "Unframed Space" in *The New Yorker*, No. 24, August 1950

Rudenstine, Angelica Zander. *Peggy Guggenheim Collection, R. Guggenheim Foundation, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation*, 1985, Harry N. Abrams, 1985

Russoli, Franco. "Scorie della città", in *Corriere della Sera*, March 23, 1969

Ryman, Robert. "Interview with Robert Ryman", by Pyllis Tuchmahn, in *Artforum*, Vol. 9, No. 9, May 1971

Ryman, Robert. "Interview with Robert Ryman" by Cummings, Paul, Oral history interview, 1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Ryman, Robert. "Robert Ryman", in *MoMA Journal*, No. 15, Autumn 1993

Ryman, Robert. *Robert Ryman*, exh. cat., curated by Nicholas Serota (Tate Gallery) and Robert Storr (MOMA), Tate Gallery, London (February 17 - April 25, 1993); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (September 22, 1993 - January 4, 1994); Museum of Modern Art SFMoMA, San Francisco (February 3 - April 17, 1994); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA (July 23 - October 2, 1994), edited by Robert Storr; Catherine Kinley; Lynn Zelevansky; Linda Norden, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1993

Ryman, Robert. "Robert Ryman, interviewed by Jeffrey Weiss," May 1997, in *Whitney Magazine*, September - December 1998

Ryman, Robert. "Robert Ryman with Phong Bui", in *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2007, online edition. <https://brooklynrail.org/2007/06/art/ryman>, accessed on September 14, 2020

Sanders, Jacquin. "One Man Against the World", in *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, February 8, 1970

Sandler, Irving. *Art of the Post Modern Era. From the late 1960s to the Early 1990s*, Westview, 2014

Sartori, Giovanni. *Homo videns. Television and post-thinking*, Laterza, 1997

Schapiro, Meyer. "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art", in *Art News*, Summer 1957

Sharpless, Grace. *Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., October 18 - November 29, 1963, Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, 1963

Schiff, Richard. "De Kooning controlling de Kooning" in *Willem de Kooning: tracing the figure*, exh. cat., February 10 - May 5, 2002, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, Princeton University, 2002

Schiff, Richard. "Donald Judd safe from Bird", in *Donald Judd*, Tate Publishing, 2004

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Andre: High Priest of Minimal Art", in *The New York Times*, October 18, 1970

Schjeldahl, Peter. "If Not Timeless, It's At Least Open-Ended", in *The New York Times*, January 23, 1972

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Agnes Martin at the Institute of Contemporary Art", in *The Art in America Review of Exhibitions*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May - June 1973

Schwarz, Dieter. *Agnes Martin, Writings*, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 2005

Seiberling, Dorothy. "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?", in *Life*, No. 6, August 8, 1949

Serrell, Beverly. *Making Exhibit Labels: A Step by Step Guide*, American Association for State and Local History, 1983

Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2015

Smithson, Robert. "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Protects," in *Artforum*, No. 1, September 1968

Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation", in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Farrar, 1964

Stafford, Barbara Maria. *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999

Still, Clyfford. *First Exhibition, Paintings*, exh. cat., February 12 - March 7, 1946, Art of This Century Gallery, New York, 1946, Clyfford Still Archives, Luna Project

Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., April 14 - 26, 1947, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, Clyfford Still Archives, Luna Project

Still, Clyfford. *Letter to Betty Parsons*, December 29, 1949, Archives of American Art, Betty Parsons Papers

Still, Clyfford. *Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., April 17 - May 6, 1950, Betty Parsons Gallery, 1950, Clyfford Still Archives, Luna Project

Still, Clyfford. "Untitled", 5 February 1952, in *15 Americans*, exh. cat., April 9 - 27 July 27, 1952, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1952

Still, Clyfford. *Letter to Clement Greenberg*, April 12, 1955, in Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Clement Greenberg papers

Still, Clyfford. *Letter to Clement Greenberg*, 28 November 1958, in Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Clement Greenberg Papers

Still, Clyfford. *Paintings by Clyfford Still*, exh. cat., November 4 - December 13, Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, 1959

Still, Clyfford. "An Open Letter to an Art Critic", in *Artforum*, Vol. 2, No. 6, December, 1963

Strickland, Edward. *Minimalism: Origins*, Indiana University, 2000

- Sweeney, James Johnson. "New Directions in Painting", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 18, No. 3, March 1960
- Sylvester, David and Kline, Franz. "Franz Kline 1910 - 1961: An Interview with David Sylvester", in David Sylvester", *Living Arts*, Vol. 1, 1963
- Sylvester, David. "Blackish", in *New Statesman*, June 12, 1964
- Sylvester, David. *Selected Writings and Interviews*, University of California, 1992
- Sylvester, David. *Interviews with American artists*, Yale University, 2001
- T.B.H., "Mark Rothko", in *Art News*, February 1950
- Townsend, Benjamin. "An Interview with Clyfford Still", in *Audit*, Winter/Spring 1961
- Trini, Tommaso. "Anselmo, Penone, Zorio e le nuove fonti d'energia per il deserto dell'arte", in *DATA. Pratica e teoria delle arti*, III, 9, 3, 1973
- Tyler, Parker. "Jackson Pollock: The Infinite Labyrinth", in *Magazine of Art*, No. 3, March 1950
- Tucker, Marcia. *Robert Morris*, exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970
- Varnedoe, Kirk. *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, Bollingen Foundation and Princeton University, 2006
- Venturi, Riccardo. *Mark Rothko: Lo spazio e la sua disciplina*, Electa, 2007
- Vergani, Leonardo. "Spazzatura alla Kusunthalle", in *Corriere della Sera*, March 30, 1969
- Vergine, Lea. *Attraverso l'arte: pratica politica-pagare il '68*, Arcana, Roma, 1976
- Vogt, Tobias. *Untitled, Zur Karriere unbetitelter Kunst in der jüngsten Moderne*, PhD Thesis, Fink Wilhelm GmbH + Co.KG, 2006
- Waldman, Diane. *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970: A Retrospective*, exh. cat., February 10 - April 1, 1979, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Harry N. Abrams, 1978
- Weiss, Jeffrey and Gage, John et al. *Mark Rothko*, exh. cat., May 3 - August 16, 1998, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998
- Wimsatt JW. K and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy", in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 54, July - September, 1946
- Wolfe, Judith. "Jungian Aspects of Jackson Pollock's Imagery", in *Artforum*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1972

Wollheim, Richard. "Minimal Art", published in *Arts Magazine*, January 1965

Wright, William. "An Interview with Jackson Pollock", 1950 in H. Harrison, *Such Desperate Joy: Imagining Jackson Pollock* (104), Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books

Yeazell, Ruth Bernard. *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names*, Princeton Press, 2015

Anonymous, "New Paintings: Mark Rothko", in *Tiger's Eye*, 9, October 1949

Anonymous, "The Passing shows: Jackson Pollock", in *Art News*, n. 4, April 1, 1945

Anonymous, in *The Times*, London, February 4 1959

Anonymous, "The Art Galleries, a Look at Franconi, Hofmann, Reinhardt and others" in *Daily Worker*, November 28, 1947

Anonymous, (G and B), "A la Kunsthalle a Berne", in *L'Express*, March 29, 1969

Anonymous, (P. Ch.), "Sensibles a l'art", in *L'Express*, December 4, 1969

