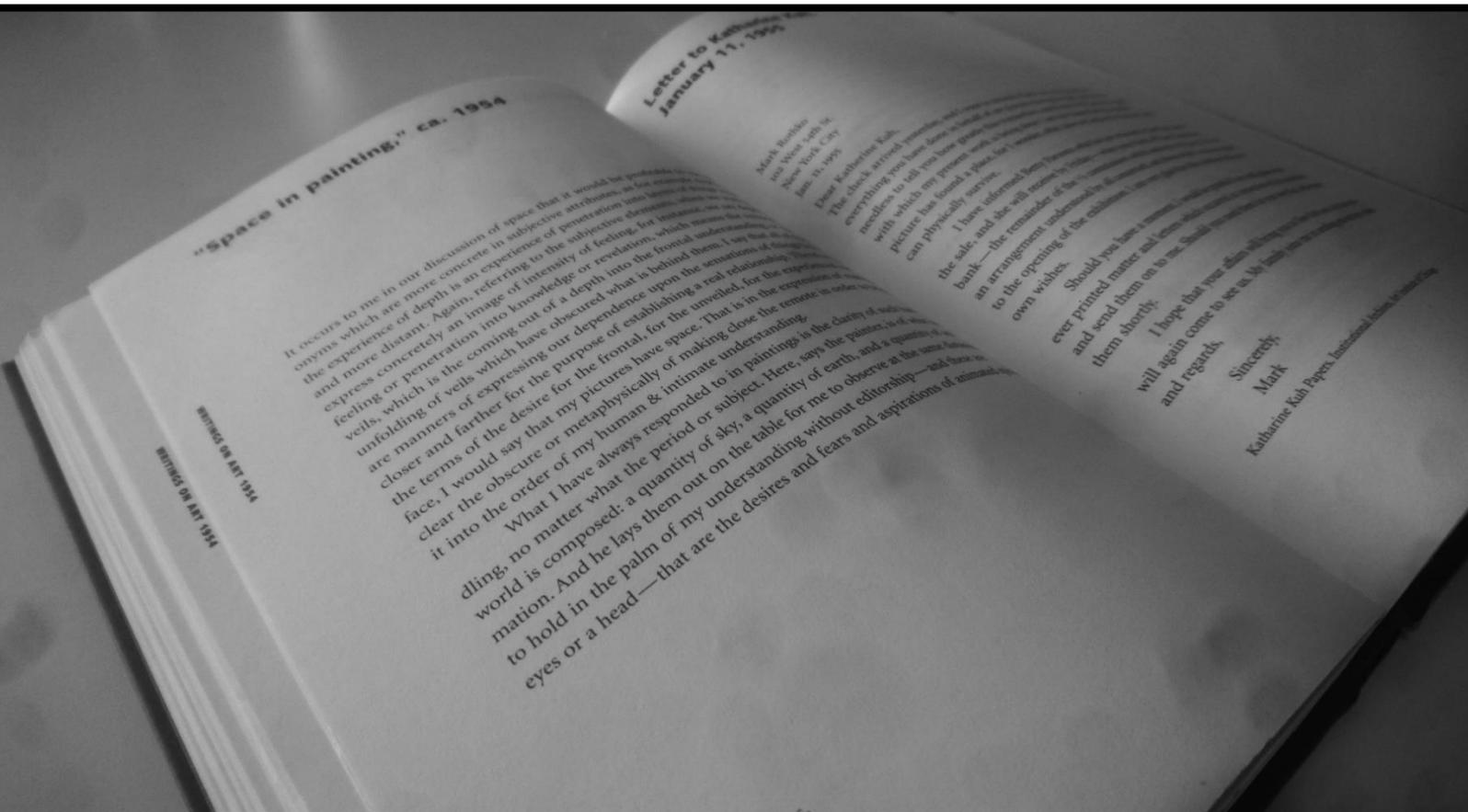


## Lost in translation: Phenomenology and Mark Rothko's writings



Evelien Boesten  
s4284720  
M. Gieskes  
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## 1. Introduction

Imagine seeing a painting by Mark Rothko (1903-1970), such as *Untitled* (1949, fig. 1) in an art museum. Typically, Rothko's work will be viewed in 'white cube' museums, such as the modern section of the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, where *Untitled* (1949) resides. The room consists of simple white walls and wooden floors. The painting's title tells you nothing but the fact that it has none. There is no shortcut to the painting's subject to be found in its given name, and we are expected to go in significantly less biased because of the title's absence.<sup>1</sup> We stand before the painting, no title or picture frame between us and the canvas. Rothko wanted the interaction between the artist and the viewer to be as direct as possible, so he tried to eliminate as many external factors as he could (such as picture frames or titles).<sup>2</sup> In *Untitled* (1949), the artist – Rothko – brought colour and form to this interaction, while the viewers are expected to bring themselves and all that they know and are.<sup>3</sup> A large yellow rectangle serves as the background to the other coloured rectangles that are brown, orange, purple, black and a semi-transparent green, which appear to float in front of it.<sup>4</sup> These smaller rectangles do not only relate to the yellow background, but to each other as well. In 1947, Rothko wrote in 'The Romantics were Prompted' that shapes 'move with internal freedom',<sup>5</sup> and it is due to this perception of movement that we may find ourselves unable to focus on just one of the rectangles on the canvas. Under most circumstances, a rectangle is a stable shape. In *Untitled* (1949), and in most of Rothko's so-called sectional works, for that matter, the stability and monumentality of each rectangle is immediately disturbed by the other shapes on the canvas, as a result of which an internal dialogue is at play. This dialogue – or, as Rothko calls it, 'movement' – makes for a lack of stability on the canvas.<sup>6</sup> The shapes are constantly being and becoming, relating to each other as well as outward to the viewer, who is struggling to find one thing to focus on.

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<sup>1</sup> Rothko, 2015, 160-161

<sup>2</sup> Rothko, 2015, 158-163

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this thesis, I shall be using they/them to refer to gender-neutral, singular parties. (Such as 'the viewer'.)

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Rothko emphasises that they float, and that they are not stacked. See: Rothko, 2015, 112-119

<sup>5</sup> Rothko, 1947, 84. The paragraph is titled 'on shapes'. We may assume that these are shapes on a canvas, although he does not specify.

<sup>6</sup> Crowther, 2012, 94-95

Rothko presents us with form and colour as described above, elements which, in his mature paintings, are entirely abstract. As there is nothing recognisable on the canvas, many people are tempted to substitute the lack of painted figurative imagery. They do so by reading imagery into the painting which, of course, is not there: Rothko's sectional works are often likened to windows, landscapes and even fridges.<sup>7</sup> By Bringing colour and form to the interaction, Rothko has fulfilled his end of the "bargain". Viewers are now expected to fulfil theirs, and while Rothko wanted to purge his works of any and all cultural associations,<sup>8</sup> the viewer is still expected to, in the artist's son's words,<sup>9</sup> project onto the canvas, inevitably shaping the conversation with elements from his or her own cultural and personal background. The conversation will therefore be different for each and every individual, and few things are as inherently human as individuality. Christopher Rothko has written that his father's paintings are about *you*.<sup>10</sup> The interaction and the communication that Rothko was aiming for, in other words, are not complete unless viewers present something truly of their own to the canvas. If depicting the human was Rothko's essential goal, then this humanity must be found within the interaction between the canvas and the viewer.

This brief exploration into the interaction between art and spectator accords with some of the methodologies employed by phenomenologists. Phenomenology is a field of theoretical studies concerned with humans and their perception of the world, including art, and can be used to shed light on the interaction between Rothko's work and the viewer, and analyses thereof. Rothko himself never spoke of phenomenology and it is highly unlikely he even knew what it was, but his *Writings on Art* (a collection of letters, interviews and essays written primarily by the artist himself, published in 2006) and *The Artist's Reality* (2004) demonstrate that he did aim to make his paintings communicate with the viewer, in order to have them perceive his paintings in a particular way. However, Rothko was not a scholar, and his thoughts on perception and art experience are often quite fragmented: *The Artist's Reality* was, after all, left unfinished and assembled later by Rothko's children, well after his passing. In this thesis, I shall attempt to connect Rothko's thoughts on art

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<sup>7</sup> Rothko, 2015, 40-41

<sup>8</sup> Rothko, 2015, 45

<sup>9</sup> Rothko, 2015, 17

<sup>10</sup> Rothko, 2015, 36-39

and perception to Paul Crowther's phenomenology on art. In doing so, it is my hope to explore whether or not they are comparable and compatible, as well as to present a new methodology through which Rothko's art might be analysed from a phenomenological perspective. Mark's writings, as well as his son's – Christopher Rothko, who wrote a book on his father: *Mark Rothko; from the inside out* (2015) – shall be connected to Paul Crowther's books on phenomenology, *The Phenomenology of Modern Art* (2012) and *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (even the frame)* (2009). These are arguably the most prevalent books written on modern art and phenomenology in recent years. Furthermore, I shall compare my own text on Rothko and phenomenology to two previous essays written on this subject. These were written by Espen Dahl (on Husserlian phenomenology, 2010) and Andrew Jay Svedlow (on interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology, 2008). Both of these texts deal with Rothko in relation to a specific phenomenological framework.

The second of two purposes of this essay is to examine how these previous texts on phenomenology and Rothko differ from my own, which is a textual analysis of Rothko's writings connected to Paul Crowther's recent phenomenology, rather than strictly a phenomenological analysis of particular artworks or a phenomenological study of Mark Rothko's art. I decided to take this approach because it has become apparent to me that, after searching for other works on Rothko and phenomenology, books on phenomenology will sometimes address Rothko, but books on Rothko will not address phenomenology.<sup>11</sup> I am of the opinion that Rothko's ideas on his art communicating with his viewers is, at least in some respects, quite similar to the complex relationships between human beings and their surroundings that phenomenology studies. It therefore strikes me as odd that Rothko's writings are rarely discussed in relation to phenomenology.

Dahl and Svedlow were not the first to write on phenomenological theories in relation to one color-field painter, nor is their application of phenomenological analyses to color-field paintings new among art historical literature. In 1990, Yve-Alain Bois published a book titled *Painting as Model*, which contains the essay 'Perceiving Newman'. Newman was a contemporary and a friend of Rothko's, and

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<sup>11</sup> The two texts I will be discussing are evidence of this: both appear in theoretical/philosophical magazines, which focus explicitly on phenomenology. Based on the books I have read on Rothko, most of which are also listed in the bibliography to this thesis, I can conclude that in the art historical/critical literature on Rothko, phenomenology has not been mentioned *by name* even once, nor has it been applied to an art theory.

they were both color-field painters who primarily worked on larger than life-sized canvases. In his essay, Bois explicates a viewer's perception of Barnett Newman's paintings, and analyses how the painting influences the viewer's eye (and vice versa). The fact that an artist and his painting can exert such influence means that the act of viewing is not an entirely autonomous, unguided affair. Bois argues that there is much more at play than what is immediately visible to the naked eye, theoretically, physically and mentally. He even goes so far as to say that *Onement I* (1948, fig. 2) 'pursues a phenomenological inquiry into the nature of perception.'<sup>12</sup> In other words: *Onement I* poses a question to the viewer, asking not *what* is being perceived, but *how* it is perceived and *why*. Bois' essay has inspired me to write this thesis. His manner of writing about Newman, that is, within the larger context of a theoretical book, seems to be the dominant *modus operandus* in phenomenological essays relating to specific artists.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Bois is arguably the most famous art historian to have written about phenomenology in relation to color-field painting. Bois' essay is a phenomenological analysis of several works by Newman, and how these works relate to each other. While this analysis is what inspired me to write about phenomenology at first, 'Perceiving Newman' is specifically aimed at one artist and this artist's works. Therefore, it is not applicable to Rothko's work, and not entirely suited to an application to this thesis. Bois' essay on Barnett Newman shall thus not be discussed further in this thesis.

In chapter 1, a phenomenological framework shall be presented. This chapter shall be based on Paul Crowther's books *The Phenomenology of Modern Art* and *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (even the frame)*. Both of these books were published within the last ten years and shall serve as quintessential examples contemporary phenomenology. Following this is a chapter on Mark Rothko's life and his writings on art, as well as his son's; these texts are then connected to Crowther's theories.

In chapter four, the texts by Dahl and Svedlow will be discussed. This comparison and the differences between each essay shall be highlighted in the fifth chapter, in order to explore why my approach – a textual analysis of an artist's writings connected to modern phenomenology – is different from previous texts, and what it has to offer to

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<sup>12</sup> Bois, 1990, 195

contemporary phenomenological analyses. This thesis shall then conclude with a summary of the differences between the essays, and a discussion of what previous writings on phenomenology and Rothko have – in my opinion – overlooked.

## 2. Phenomenology and its relation to art as described by Crowther

Paul Crowther (Leeds, 1953) is a philosophy professor at the National University of Ireland in Galway. He has written numerous works on art and (art) philosophy. He has formulated a new phenomenological methodology, which he calls post-analytic phenomenology.<sup>14</sup> Post-analytic philosophy is a branch of philosophical thought which detaches itself from objective and absolute truths such as they were defined by Enlightenment philosophers. Instead, it focuses on the unpredictability of humanity in its thought processes, conventions and social norms and/or collective progress towards the future. In short: post-analytic philosophy chooses to focus less on the 'truth' provided by an analysis – or rather, not acknowledge the truth resulting from any singular analysis as the one and only available truth. It considers all of human possibility and impossibility – that is, everything within the confines of what humans can and cannot do, where the limitations of what humans cannot do are equally important to what they *can* do – thus making 'truth' an unstable and unattainable phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

As Crowther employed a philosophical methodology which combined post-analytic philosophy with phenomenology, we must now move on to defining phenomenology. Phenomenology studies, as described by the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy:

[...] the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity.<sup>16</sup>

In essence, phenomenological study aims to uncover how we, as people, experience the world around us, and why we do this in a certain manner. Crowther's phenomenology, which focuses explicitly on art (specifically paintings), explains this experience from a first-person point of view, focussing on how one individual might look at and view an artwork.<sup>17</sup> Given that the vast majority of literature on art philosophy and theory is heavily dependent on our senses, particularly vision, it would appear that sensory perception is very important to a lot of art philosophy. Our vision dictates a large portion of our behaviour in front of paintings: bodily perception of paintings is dependent on visual perception, as people tend to position their body before a canvas based on what they see *on*

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<sup>14</sup> Crowther, 2009, 1-2

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.iep.utm.edu/con-meta/#SH3c> (Website consulted on 19-06-2017)

<sup>16</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/> (Website consulted on 27-04-2017)

<sup>17</sup> Based on Crowther, 2009/2012

the canvas.<sup>18</sup> Post-analytic phenomenology takes into account all of the changeable factors surrounding the experience of art, our perception of it, and our own unpredictability as humans.

In *The Phenomenology of Modern Art*, Crowther writes that the book addresses style as a bearer of aesthetic meaning.<sup>19</sup> He offers a different perspective from other theorists when it comes to style, one that dissociates itself from connoisseurship, and instead considers style as the way in which an individual artist chooses to represent the world. Moreover, he writes that style is a way to disclose attitudes (presumably the artist's) towards aspects of the world.<sup>20</sup> These attitudes have to do with the human experience relating to these aspects of the world. An essential point Crowther's phenomenology makes is that style changes the character of the subject matter being addressed, and therefore changes the viewer's experience of the subject matter.<sup>21</sup> An example would be Barnett Newman's *Cathedra* (1951, fig. 3). This massive color-field painting refers to, as its title suggests, a bishop's throne. The theory and Biblical inspirations behind this painting aside, we do not see a bishop's throne. We see two blue squares and a rectangle, separated by white, vertical 'zips'. There is nothing in this work that suggests a seat of any kind, and thus our perception is halted: where is the throne? What are we looking at? The subject 'Cathedra' is changed because of the style in which it is depicted. The abstraction on the canvas, too, adds to the changeable meaning of 'Cathedra'. The title is a significant factor in how the painting is perceived as well, while the painting renders the meaning of the title unstable in its turn.

Another important point is that style never exists inside a vacuum; it is not an absolute, created by one person under one distinct set of circumstances that can never be repeated.<sup>22</sup> Crowther offers to consider style as an artistic *tendency* instead, one that exists because of other tendencies. In this book, Crowther describes four tendencies of modern art, occurring during the early twentieth century:<sup>23</sup>

1. Traditional academic notions of ideal form, finish, composition and skill (relating to how paint is applied) are abandoned. In order to form a more authentic, more emotional bond with the viewer of the artwork.

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<sup>18</sup> In all of the literature I consulted there is no mention of non-visual art experience and its respective phenomenology. Rothko's art especially is heavily dependent on visual perception, hence this definition of phenomenology and art within the context of this thesis.

<sup>19</sup> Crowther, 2012, 1

<sup>20</sup> Crowther, 2012, 2

<sup>21</sup> Crowther, 2012, 3

<sup>22</sup> Crowther, 2012, 2-3

<sup>23</sup> Crowther, 2012, 4-5

2. The emphasis is on subject matter no longer dictated by traditional academic criteria, or moral propriety. The abandoning of academic criteria meant that biblical/religious scenes no longer dominated painted subject matter. The abandonment of moral propriety has to do with newly popular subjects that are considered controversial, provocative or disturbing.
3. There is a deliberate choice to employ a non-figurative style of painting, to abandon all recognisable form.
4. There exists a 'planar emphasis'. This flatness is a feature of the modern style. Even if there is a figurative aspect to the works, these tend to look flatter.

It is within the context of these tendencies that certain modern styles, for there are many, came into being. Among them is color-field painting, which immediately ticks off all four boxes. Although Newman and Rothko differ a great deal when it comes to subject matter – most of Rothko's works are *Untitled* – they do overlap on all three other points. Their works are flat, they represent nothing recognisable at first glance, and abandon any notion of form, finish and composition such as they were formulated by traditional art academia. At one point, Rothko himself said that he was not interested in relations of form and colour, and sought a way to express and communicate basic human emotions.<sup>24</sup> His representation of these emotions is different from previously emotionally evocative works because of the development (and resulting tendencies) of modern art, and so is our perception of these paintings.

In *The Phenomenology of the visual arts (even the frame)*, specifically chapter six – 'The Logic and Phenomenology of Abstract Art' – Crowther writes about how the visual arts are perceived, and how abstract art 'works'. That is, Crowther aims to clarify how abstract art is perceived, but also how abstract art guides perceivers in their perception. Before we dive into chapter six, however, two essential terms that first appear in the introduction to this book need to be addressed: formative aesthetic power and intrinsic significance. These are integral to any phenomenological analysis, as well as a textual analysis of Rothko's writings.

Formative aesthetic power relates to the artist's stylistic choices – that is, their handling of the materials and medium used – which alter how the represented is perceived.<sup>25</sup> Basically, the way an artist chooses to represent something, depending on his choice of materials, medium and style,

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<sup>24</sup> Rodman, 1957, 92-94

<sup>25</sup> Crowther, 2009, 9

significantly alters the way we look at an artwork, and how we cognitively perceive it. (Newman's *Cathedra* would, again, serve as a great example of formative aesthetic power for reasons that have already been discussed.)

The second term, the 'intrinsic significance of the image' has, according to Crowther, known many definitions throughout history. Crowther's own definition of intrinsic significance refers to the *intrinsic* meaning of an artwork, which is not derived from its subject but from the artwork itself. Meaning is intrinsic to the artwork. This is also why artistic formation plays such an important part: the way the artwork was made and how it looks as a result is what provides the signification of the artwork.<sup>26</sup>

With these two terms defined, we may move on to chapter six of *The Phenomenology of the visual arts*. The chapter starts with the general point that people enjoy abstract art, in spite of the fact that they do not recognise anything on the canvas, and may not have the specialised knowledge that art historians have about these abstract works, or, indeed, of the tendencies of modern art. The appeal of abstract art to people from all walks of life might be found in the look of a painting, but this would reduce such enjoyment to mere formalism. ('I like the colours' or 'the shapes are satisfying to look at'.) Crowther rejects the idea of people enjoying abstract works simply for their formal qualities, insisting that there are deeper connections at work. He theorises that abstract art has a transhistorical and transcultural value. In other words: shapes and colours are prevalent in every society, at every point in time. Therefore, abstract art should appeal to everyone.<sup>27</sup>

It is difficult to detach from a purely formal appreciation of abstract art, as the formal qualities appear to be all there is. However, Crowther writes, the appreciations are often neither entirely based on historical context, nor on formal qualities *per se*.<sup>28</sup> An appreciation is happening that goes beyond what the eye can see; it registers differently than 'I like the way this looks'. On a basic level, it would be 'I like this', but the *why* often remains difficult to define. This is where phenomenological depth comes into play. Phenomenological depth indicates the way in which an artwork embodies complex relations and exchanges between the viewer and the perceived object. Abstract works, so Crowther writes, connect to 'more fundamental meanings based on factors that are integral to how we inhabit the world cognitively and metaphysically'.<sup>29</sup> He attempts to explain this in six subchapters, of which the first four shall be summarised below. Subchapter five is an example of the previous

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<sup>26</sup> Crowther, 2009, 6-11

<sup>27</sup> Crowther, 2009, 99-100

<sup>28</sup> Crowther, 2009, 101

<sup>29</sup> Crowther, 2009, 102

four, explained through a sculpture by Eli Bornstein. In subchapter six, Crowther correlates his methodology to scientific research, that is, empirical research with quantifiable results. As all of the methodology has been discussed prior to part five and six, and these do not contribute further to an application to Rothko, these shall not be summarised here.

In subchapter one, he analyses the appropriateness of 'abstract art' as a general term. He argues that while 'abstract' is an ahistorical term, for not every artwork which is non-figurative is abstract, it is best used for works which *are* abstract. Abstract art, in other words, refers to a very specific type of modern art, not just art which is non-figurative.<sup>30</sup> Although Crowther does not elaborate on this, it can be argued that abstract art is the result of the aforementioned tendencies of modern art. A sixteenth-century painter drawing a few lines on a canvas, lines which do not result in a figure, is not the same as an abstract artist painting an abstract work. Abstract art is the result of the artist's desire to create abstract works.

In subchapter two, Crowther writes about 'the presumption of virtuality'. This is a complex phenomenon: though abstract art is very different from traditional (figurative) art, abstract art must follow the representational format of figurative works in order to be recognised *as* art. This causes a new problem to arise: traditional subject matter is usually clear, or at least visually recognisable, whereas abstract art – if it has any subject matter at all – is not. In museum settings, a common response to abstract art is to immediately look for an explanation, to find the work's true meaning, instead of just observing and experiencing the work.<sup>31</sup> How many people have encountered a Rothko and immediately gone to read the accompanying description, instead of standing before it first? The presumption of virtuality is the expectation that what you see is not, in fact, what you get. The setting in which abstract art is placed creates an expectation that abstract art was not necessarily meant to fulfil. The *lack* of subject matter, the absence of a clear subject, topic or depiction can also be interpreted as meaningful. Therefore, even in art that depicts nothing, the presumption of virtuality remains present.<sup>32</sup>

At last, Crowther turns to figure-ground relations. Knowing and perceiving are always done in relation to 'something else'. It should be noted that Crowther's conception of "figure-ground relations" refers to the artwork's (the figure) place in the world (the ground), and is not the same as figure-ground relations contained within an artwork. Artworks not only contain figure-ground relations, they also create them. This is what Crowther refers to as 'virtual space': a space in which

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<sup>30</sup> Crowther, 2009, 103-104

<sup>31</sup> Crowther, 2009, 104-105

<sup>32</sup> Crowther, 2009, 105-106

the 'relation to' something else allows for congruence between the familiar perceptual world (our everyday world, in which we live) and the artwork's virtual space.<sup>33</sup> In short: virtual space is the space around the artwork, which creates it, and in which we may recognise or relate to objects/circumstances from outside this virtual space.

In subchapter three, Crowther analyses how perception works. He explains that perception is not just a strictly visual affair, but one of the mind as well. The way in which we recognise objects in our field of vision is also heavily dependent on our psychological and emotional relations to them. For example, a table and a knife elicit different cognitive responses. Crowther summarises these responses as 'soliciting and avoidance'.<sup>34</sup> This basically means that we either interact positively or negatively with any spatial object: we may pick up the knife; we would not pick up the table. We may sit on the table; we would not sit upon the knife. These seem like perfectly obvious things to do, but the cognitive process prior to the action – occurring during the initial perception of the objects – happens entirely in the subconscious. The conscious knowledge of object characteristics is, Crowther writes, 'not entertained every time we perceive a spatial object'.<sup>35</sup>

We now come to a difficult point, or rather, an elusive term – the 'horizon' – which warrants an explanation. Crowther writes:

The decisive point then is that all perception depends on the object of perception's relation to an horizon of *possibility and relations*. This horizon engages different levels of tacit knowledge and expectation which give the object a specific character. It is the key factor in phenomenological depth.<sup>36</sup>

In order to understand what this means, we need to define what an horizon is. In phenomenology, the horizon is essentially the scope of cultural and historical knowledge and experience which determines the given character of an object. This horizon is not explicit, and is usually considered as a natural fact, a given. In fact, the examples provided above (of unconscious soliciting and avoiding) are evidence of object horizons specific to one particular context (my own). There must be, for example, people in the world who consider it vastly disrespectful to sit upon a table – their 'table's object horizon' is different from my own.

The horizon additionally involves what Crowther calls 'contextual space': a space of possibilities which structures the visible and shapes our interpretation of what is given in normal perception.<sup>37</sup> He distinguishes seven levels of contextual space, summarised below<sup>38</sup>:

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<sup>33</sup> Crowther, 2009, 106

<sup>34</sup> Crowther, 2009, 105-106

<sup>35</sup> Crowther, 2009, 107

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

- 1) Knowledge based on previous experience of the aspects of objects which, under normal circumstances (i.e. basic, unenhanced perception), are not (immediately) visible. This includes surface detail, different points of view, what it looks like from the inside, etc.
- 2) Visual configuration arising from the altering (in any way, shape or form, up to and including utter destruction) of the object.
- 3) Possible items/relations/states of affairs/life-forms which might exist in environments radically different from our usual ones.
- 4) Visuals linked by the imaginative association of elements, instead of a physical correspondence with the world around us. (i.e. imaginative associations vs. factual happenings.)
- 5) Visual forms of which certain aspects are linked to states of mind. ('violent lines', 'joyful colours', etc.)
- 6) The unexpected association where a visible form looks like something other than itself. (For example: seeing faces in objects which are not faces/meant to look like faces.)
- 7) Dreamlike qualities or generic ambiances.

Contextual space is where objects are contextualised, at least partially based on the viewer's horizon. Not all seven levels of contextual space are always equally important, and therefore the levels are not always at play. Levels one and two take physical, spatial relations into account, and are therefore the most essential. Three and four are important, for humans are imaginative and spiritual beings, but these two levels are not as fundamental as the first two. Levels three to seven, Crowther writes, are *associational* levels. Each level is an individual interpretative perspective, which can be applied to any visual item. He concludes part three by summarising what contextual space is: a realm of expectations centred on the aforementioned details and possibilities, which inform the character of everyday visible reality – either implicitly or explicitly – but without being immediately visible under normal circumstances.<sup>39</sup> All of the phenomenological concepts discussed above, from formative aesthetic power to contextual space, shall return in dealing with Rothko's writings in chapter 3.3.

In subchapter four, Crowther turns to abstract art again, considering how it connects to contextual space, starting with a discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty suggests that painting makes explicit the 'invisible' details and effects which are essential to some objects:<sup>40</sup> shine, texture, colour, shape; a myriad of examples could illustrate his point. One would be how one never notices the light reflecting in a person's eyes, but when eyes are painted, these white dots which represent

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<sup>37</sup> Crowther, 2009, 102; 108-110

<sup>38</sup> Crowther, 2009, 108-110

<sup>39</sup> Crowther, 2009, 110

<sup>40</sup> Crowther, 2009, 110-111

light are suddenly much more visible, however realistically painted the eyes may be. Our vision simplifies these real-life details and our brain does not take note, but the painter explicates these by representing them.

In abstract art, these details serve a distinct purpose. As there is nothing recognisable to focus on, one tends to focus on the 'invisible', meaning the elements which usually go unnoticed in figurative paintings; the stroke of the brush, the angle at which a shape was cut off, the colours chosen, and so forth. This is crucial, for Crowther reaches his decisive point with this: each abstract work opens up a virtual space, where we attempt to relate to objects or circumstances outside of this space. However, for the lack of anything recognisable, the perceived formal properties of the work must refer to some aspect of contextual space, instead. If *this* turns out not to be the case, then the work is no more than a neutral, perceivable object.<sup>41</sup> By virtue of the presumption of virtuality, however, such neutrality is impossible. Therefore there must always be a connection to an aspect of contextual space.

Concluding part four, Crowther writes that art is primarily a social activity.<sup>42</sup> This goes for viewers as well as artists, since artists typically share their works with the world. However, if they want to express a certain feeling or represent a state of being, they are forced to do so within the confines of what is understandable within their respective culture, lest the meaning of the work be lost on the viewer. For abstract art, and by extension, Rothko's art, this is especially interesting.

In the next chapter, Crowther's methodology and terminology shall be applied to Rothko's writing in chapter 3.3, in order to uncover whether or not Rothko was attempting to trigger the usage of certain aspects of contextual space, and how.

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<sup>41</sup> Crowther, 2009, 111

<sup>42</sup> Crowther, 2009, 113

### 3. Mark Rothko

#### I. Life and Art

Mark Rothko (fig. 4) was born in Dvinsk, Russia (modern-day Latvia) on September 26<sup>th</sup> 1903 as the youngest of four children in a Jewish family.<sup>43</sup> He was born as Marcus Rothkowitz, son of Jacob and Kate Rothkowitz.<sup>44</sup> His father, whom Rothko recalled as a man of great character and intelligence, was a pharmacist, social democrat and strongly anti-religious in nature.<sup>45</sup> Due to political and economic struggle, he was forced to emigrate in 1910. Fearing the conscription of his two oldest sons into the tsarist army, he had them emigrate to America in 1912, and then the rest of his family in 1913.<sup>46</sup> Rothko would later remark that his forced emigration in 1913 had left him feeling out of place; America would never quite become his home.<sup>47</sup>

The family moved to Portland, Oregon, where Jacob would die the following year: on March 27<sup>th</sup> 1914, Mark Rothko watched his father die of colon cancer, which – according to James Breslin, his biographer – haunted him for the rest of his life, resulting in anger, bitterness and a distrust of his surroundings he was never able to shake, even tainting his career as an artist.<sup>48</sup> A journalist, John Fischer, who had met Rothko while traveling on the USS Constitution in 1959, recalled this same distrust in that Rothko had only talked to him because it had quickly become apparent that Fischer knew nothing about art, art critics, dealers or collectors. If he had, Rothko would have left him be, for he distrusted these types of people, those related to the art world, greatly.<sup>49</sup>

Rothko left to study at Yale University in 1921, taking courses on English, French and European history, among other things, but left the University – without a degree – in 1923, for two reasons: increasing contempt for Yale and his own financial situation: his scholarship had been converted into a loan, forcing him to work alongside his studies.<sup>50</sup> When he left Yale in 1923, he moved to New York

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<sup>43</sup> Breslin, 1993, 10

<sup>44</sup> Breslin, 1993, 14

<sup>45</sup> Breslin, 1993, 15-21

<sup>46</sup> Breslin, 1993, 21-22

<sup>47</sup> Fischer, 1970, 132

<sup>48</sup> Breslin, 26-27

<sup>49</sup> Fischer, 1970, 131-133; on that note, Fischer's necrology of Rothko is even called 'portrait of the artist as an angry man'.

<sup>50</sup> Waldman, 1978, 22; Breslin, 1993, 47-51

City, to 'wander around, bum about, and starve a bit'.<sup>51</sup> Here, he would occasionally wander into an Art Students League model painting class, watch as the students were sketching a nude model, and immediately decide that was the life for him.<sup>52</sup> Throughout every biographical work on Rothko, this episode appears to be the genesis of his artist career, one that was begun by sheer coincidence, by chance, and which would lead to Rothko becoming one of the leading artists of the New York School and twentieth-century American art in general.

Rothko's works of the 1920s and 30s still feature recognisable (figurative) scenes (fig. 5). His paintings of the time primarily represent people, often nudes, and urban scenery, such as *Subway* (1937, fig. 6) As far as style is concerned, Rothko appears to have taken little notice of the turbulent European art world, where – among others – Cubism, Dadaism and Futurism had been extremely popular, even though these were no longer the dominant movements during the 1930s and 1940s. Rothko, in spite of his Russian roots, was an American, and American artists had 'inherited' realism (as well as American Regionalism).<sup>53</sup> It is during this time that Rothko worked on *The Artist's Reality*, a book on art and artists which he never finished. It was extensively edited post-mortem by his children, Kate and Christopher Rothko, and published in 2004.

Throughout the 1930s and well into the 1940s, Rothko's paintings became more and more abstract – or, perhaps, for he did not ever consider himself an abstractionist, less and less figurative – showing influences of Surrealism (fig. 7), culminating in the entirely non-figurative *multiforms* (fig. 8) of the late 1940s. Rothko's abandonment of the figure was a deliberate choice, although the process of abandoning the figure entirely would span several years. During his 1958 address at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, Rothko said that he had abandoned the figure with 'great reluctance' because it did not meet his needs, and that 'anyone who painted the figure automatically mutilated it'.<sup>54</sup> His primary struggle with the figure was that it could not be painted as it was while still expressing the everyday world. Rothko's desire to paint something universal, something deeply and irrevocably human, could not be satisfied by the figure.<sup>55</sup> His son, Christopher, elaborates on this:

[...] because my father abandoned the figure and embraced abstraction to create the possibility of this other type of experience; an experience freed from the residue of the everyday. He intentionally

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<sup>51</sup> Waldman, 1978, 22; Breslin, 1993, 54

<sup>52</sup> Waldman, 1978, 22; Breslin, 1993, 55; Fischer, 1970, 135

<sup>53</sup> Waldman, 1978, 23: Rothko on realism: "That was what we inherited."

<sup>54</sup> Rothko, 1958, 125-126: Rothko on his abandonment of the figure: "No one could paint the figure as it was and feel that he could produce something that could express the world. I refuse to mutilate and had to find another way of expression."

<sup>55</sup> Rothko, 1958, 126

stepped away from the figure [...] in the hopes of breaking the association between the objects he painted and the cultural milieu in which they would be read.<sup>56</sup>

The multiforms were the prelude to Rothko's color-field paintings (fig. 9). Their initial purpose was to move with a fluidity that the figure did not possess, to make gestures that the figure could not, but Rothko deemed the multiforms unsatisfactory.<sup>57</sup> The color-field paintings, so he says during the address to the Pratt Institute, are 'involved with the *scale* of human feelings'.<sup>58</sup> In a way, these canvases are not only monumental in their literal size, they are also monumental in the amount of humanity they express, as well as the power behind this humanity. Gestures refer to more than a physical motion, as Rothko primarily concerns himself with the emotions that his canvases can stir within the viewer. An important theme in Christopher Rothko's book, *Mark Rothko; From the Inside Out*, is his father's ever-ongoing search for ways to best express the human condition, which Christopher believes to have been his father's one and only true goal.<sup>59</sup> The color-field paintings, which were the only paintings Rothko would do for the last twenty years of his life, are then his ultimate expression of the human condition, of human tragedy.

Rothko's color-field paintings are usually life-sized (human-scaled), although Christopher warns us to not neglect the smaller works, especially those on paper.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the large (often over six feet tall) works are considered the 'classic' Rothko. When one thinks of a classic Rothko color-field, one will most likely think of a canvas that covers most of the height of a museum wall, enveloping the viewer. Although Rothko's color-fields show relatively little variety when it comes to form, for they almost always are similar in terms of composition and shape – differently sized rectangles placed over or above each other – there was one decisive moment in 1969, near the end of his life, where he changes the format once more. Instead of allowing the background (against which the rectangles are painted) to function as a 'frame' (none of Rothko's color-fields have separate frames), he began to eliminate the background entirely. The rectangles in these later works touch the edges of the canvas (fig. 10), 'closing' the painting on their own. There no longer exists a background; the rectangles *are* the background as well as the 'figure' – that is, in terms of art historical figure-ground relations intrinsic to the artwork in isolation – leaving the color-field feeling closed off and distant.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Rothko, 2015, 45

<sup>57</sup> Rothko, 1958, 126: Rothko on the fluidity of his *multiforms*: "I began to use morphological forms in order to paint gestures that I could not make people do. But this was unsatisfactory."

<sup>58</sup> Rothko, 1958, 125-126

<sup>59</sup> Rothko, 2015, 3

<sup>60</sup> Rothko, 2015, 80, 83-88

<sup>61</sup> Rothko, 2015, 72

During his career as a color-field painter, Rothko did not make a lot of money, nor did he take that many commissions. He exhibited his works only a few times, as he was extremely sensitive 'to their needs'.<sup>62</sup> He did not want his paintings to be seen by people who would not value them, who would somehow defile them with their ignorance. Here, again, Rothko's distrust of his surroundings shows. Aside from his distrust of the art world and the 'professionals' within, he did not even trust the general public with his paintings.

Two major commissions dominate this period of Rothko's career: the Seagram murals, which were the first paintings he ever made on commission, originally meant for the Four Seasons restaurant in New York City, and the Rothko Chapel murals for the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. The former commission he truly detested; the latter he loved.

The Seagram murals (fig. 11) were the cause of some rather colourful words of Rothko's, which we shall turn to in due course. First, a brief history: the Seagram building was designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who had been contracted in 1954 by the Bronfman family. Philip Johnson, in turn, was chosen to design the public spaces inside the building, among which was the Four Seasons restaurant. Rothko had apparently misunderstood what – or whom – he was painting his pictures for, because a 'committed socialist', as Christopher Rothko puts it, would never paint pictures for the New York upper class, which was the restaurant's target demographic.<sup>63</sup> Through 1958 and well into 1959 he worked on the murals, until he himself had a meal in the actual restaurant in 1959. Distraught and disillusioned, he withdrew from the commission and paid back the advance he had received.<sup>64</sup>

Later, during the conversation with John Fischer aboard the USS Constitution discussed earlier, Rothko would angrily remark that he would never take such a commission again. Not only did he loathe the setting in which his paintings would have hung, he also loathed the people that would get to see them. 'The richest bastards of New York', he called them, who came to 'eat and show off'. He also said that he had 'taken the commission with strictly malicious intentions'.<sup>65</sup> Christopher Rothko argues that his father had not meant this literally, if he had said it at all, and that this statement only appears in Fischer's 'obituary' (published in 1970), eleven years after the encounter took place. He also notes that it is very likely that Fischer greatly exaggerated the encounter, and that both he and Mark had been drinking alcohol during that time. Given the fact that these quotes were published

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<sup>62</sup> Rothko, 2015, 3

<sup>63</sup> Rothko, 2015, 132-133

<sup>64</sup> Waldman, 1978, 65

<sup>65</sup> Fischer, 1970, 131

post-mortem, not to mention the fact that it is highly unlikely that Rothko thought they would ever make it out of the bar they were spoken in, it is best to take them with a grain of salt.<sup>66</sup>

Discussions of fact or fiction aside, the myth surrounding the Seagram murals is pervasive throughout books, articles and essays on Rothko. His supposed anger and dissatisfaction are often considered to be the quintessential reason for the murals' dark colour palette, when in reality, Rothko very likely had an idea of the space in which they were to be hanged, and adjusted the colours accordingly. The Seagram murals never did make it to the Four Seasons restaurant. In total, he had made three sets of panels for the murals, the first of which was sold as separate paintings. The second was abandoned, and the third was donated to the Tate Gallery in London, where they still reside to this day.<sup>67</sup>

The second commission would be the Rothko Chapel murals (fig. 12). John and Dominique de Menil commissioned Rothko in 1964, asking him to help create a chapel for St. Thomas University, a Catholic institution. By the time it was built it had been rid of any denominations, becoming a chapel of all faiths rather than a Catholic/Christian one. The chapel is located in Houston, Texas, and was dedicated on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1971.<sup>68</sup> It is octagonal in shape, designed by Philip Johnson.<sup>69</sup> The murals in the chapel consist of three triptychs and five single panels, all of which are painted in dark colours; black rectangles on a maroon background, or entirely black with a maroon wash.<sup>70</sup> During Dominique de Menil's inaugural address on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 1971, he said that Rothko wanted the paintings to be intimate and timeless. De Menil himself notes that they are warm; that there is a glow in the central panel. He calls them 'nocturnal murals', for the night is peaceful and full of life, as are Rothko's paintings.<sup>71</sup>

These murals are among the darkest of Rothko's oeuvre. When talking about the Rothko chapel, a common response from visitors is that it is a profoundly spiritual space. Other words that often come up are "unsettling", "eerie", and "depressing". Others call it "meditative", "introspective" and "powerful". Reviews vary from the extremely positive to the shockingly negative. One particular Google review called the space "demonic" and "evil".<sup>72</sup> Christopher Rothko himself confirms this in

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<sup>66</sup> Rothko, 2015, 134

<sup>67</sup> Waldman, 1978, 65

<sup>68</sup> De Menil, 2010, 12

<sup>69</sup> Waldman, 1978, 67

<sup>70</sup> Waldman, 1978, 68

<sup>71</sup> De Menil, 2010, 17-18

<sup>72</sup> Based on Google reviews of the Rothko Chapel, as of 17-05-2017:

<https://www.google.nl/search?q=rothko+chapel&og=rothko+chapel&aqs=chrome.0.69i59j69i60j0l4.2767j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#lrd=0x8640c09d2c210c3f:0xcf3742bbde6939bd,1>, - Individual reviews cannot be linked, but can easily be found by scrolling through the list.

his book: “Those who don’t like the chapel and the atmosphere my father created speak of it as a cold place, with paintings that are unyielding [...]”.<sup>73</sup>

Christopher Rothko writes that the space is meant to make the viewer feel alone, that it is not meant to engage in the way that other, older paintings do. The colours are dark: figure-ground relations – as far as they are present at all – cannot be seen; there is a lack of ‘surface movement’, of dynamic interaction between shapes on the canvas. In short: the canvases provide very little in the communicative process. Christopher concludes that these murals are about you, the viewer. Several reviews also call the Rothko Chapel ‘reflective’:<sup>74</sup> a place where one comes to think about oneself. Although perhaps Mark Rothko himself would detest the comparison, the paintings here function as huge, looming mirrors.<sup>75</sup> There is, in spite of that fact that the paintings seem to bring very little to the ‘conversation’, still a significant amount of phenomenological depth at play.

From the start of his career, when he was creating colourful, realist works, until the end of his career in 1970, when his works had turned abstract and black and white, Rothko wrote many essays, short manifests and letters on art and the art world, which we shall now turn to. Unfortunately, much like *The Artist’s Reality*, a lot of these letters and the like are unfinished or vague: drafts of manifests, or simply brief thoughts written down on paper. They are Rothko’s thoughts strewn about on paper, and therefore rather difficult to understand at times. As this is the case, Christopher Rothko’s book about his father’s life and work shall serve as a second primary source in the following chapter. In this book, he elucidates a significant amount of his father’s work and writing, providing insights that only a son could have.

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<sup>73</sup> Rothko, 2015, 38

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<https://www.google.nl/search?q=rothko+chapel&og=rothko+chapel&aqs=chrome.0.69i59j69i60j0l4.2767j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#lrd=0x8640c09d2c210c3f:0xcf3742bbde6939bd,1>, (Website consulted on 21-07-2017)

<sup>75</sup> Rothko, 2015, 38-39

## II. Rothko's writings on art

Mark Rothko's writings do not usually take centre stage in literature about his art, instead focusing on his paintings, in spite of the fact that he wrote several texts on his own art, as well as art in general. In this chapter, the amount of cherry-picking of relevant writings has been limited as much as possible. The books that I shall be discussing are *Writings on Art*, a collection of texts assembled and edited by Miguel López-Remiro in 2006; *The Artist's Reality*, Mark Rothko's unfinished philosophies on art, edited, assembled and published by Christopher and Kate Rothko in 2004, and lastly: *Mark Rothko, from the inside out*, a book on Mark Rothko by his son, Christopher Rothko, published in 2015. Due to the large amount of writing Rothko left behind it is, however, impossible to discuss everything. Because of the substantial quantity of letters, essays, manifests that Rothko wrote, as well as interviews conducted with him, a careful selection of the most relevant writings has been made. The deciding factors in whether or not a particular text was chosen were mostly dependent on its relevance to this thesis, based on questions such as: does this text deal with Rothko's art specifically, and does it focus on the interaction between Rothko's art and the viewer? If not, does it at least consider art and art experience in general, or is it limited to Rothko's personal life and therefore not useable? With questions such as these to serve as a guideline, several texts – especially letters – were immediately eliminated from the list of works that were to be discussed in this chapter.

The chapter shall progress as follows: the first book that will be discussed shall be *The Artist's Reality*, as it is the only book that was entirely written by Mark Rothko, even if it was edited by his children. Following this, selected works from *Writings on Art* shall be addressed. Christopher Rothko's book about his father shall occasionally be cited to provide commentary on both books, but shall not be discussed separately, as I feel that what Christopher has to say about his father and his father's art is not quite relevant to this thesis. Christopher's comments on his father's writing and character help to elucidate some of Mark Rothko's unclear statements, and work well as an *additional* elaboration of them. I do not believe it useful to consider Christopher Rothko's own thoughts on Rothko's art, as we are here primarily looking at phenomenological elements contained within Mark Rothko's writing, and not his son's.

Before we move on to the actual texts, however, let us briefly look at how *The Artist's Reality* came into being. Its history is elusive: there is no clear starting date, nor is it clear when Rothko abandoned the book. His son writes that the first reference to the book, made by Mark Rothko himself, occurred

in 1936, and the last in 1941.<sup>76</sup> It would appear, then, that the book was written in this five year span, even if it is unclear during what time it was written exactly. Furthermore, this means that the book was written while Rothko was still a figurative painter, so one might wonder whether or not it is at all applicable to his later (abstract) art. Again, we turn to his son, who answers this question for us: yes, the book absolutely can be read within the context of his sectional paintings.<sup>77</sup> He even goes so far as to call the book ‘prophetic’<sup>78</sup>, suggesting that he believes that Mark Rothko foresaw his eventual departure from the figure.

The book, Mark Rothko writes, is ‘devoted mainly to the description of plastic elements’.<sup>79</sup> I would contradict this for several reasons: for one, while the book *does* indeed deal with ‘plastic elements’ (i.e. form and material qualities, and what the artwork will look like as a result), the majority of the book is not actually about technique or material. Christopher and Kate Rothko chose the subtitle ‘philosophies on art’ with good reason: the book primarily consists of thoughts on the notion of the artist, the perception of art, and art history. However, as the book was left unfinished, it is perhaps unfair to hold Rothko accountable for contradictory lines in the book.<sup>80</sup> It is important that we approach with caution, for we are dealing with an edited proto-manuscript, published 34 years after his death. Additionally, Rothko likely believed it would never see the light of day.

With all that being said, let us move on to the contents of *The Artist’s Reality*. Rothko’s *own* words (his son wrote the introduction to the book) measure up to about 130 pages worth of text. It is also worth noting that Rothko never refers to himself as an artist on these pages, nor does he refer to his own art, and as one progresses through the book, the author’s identity (as an artist) remains quite obscure. If it weren’t for Rothko’s name on the cover, one would not know that he had written it. Various topics are discussed in the book: the first chapter is called ‘The Artist’s Dilemma’. In this chapter, Rothko wrote about the popular conception of the artist – that of an obtuse ‘moron’<sup>81</sup> – and how this is essentially a myth. Following this, there are several chapters on the creation of art, the perception of art, different aspects of art (plasticity, space, beauty, naturalism, subject and subject matter), with six small chapters on different kinds of art (primitivism, modern art, indigenous art, among others). As I said before, it is impossible to discuss everything, and not everything in this book

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<sup>76</sup> Rothko, 2015, 98; Christopher does not specify *where* the book is mentioned.

<sup>77</sup> Rothko, 2015, 99

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Rothko, 2004, 43

<sup>80</sup> Additionally, *The Artist’s Reality* and the later texts in *Writings on Art* contradict each other more than once. I consider this a result of his developing ideas on art and the art world, and his later views on the matter are not necessarily more important than his previous thoughts.

<sup>81</sup> Rothko, 2004, 1

is relevant to this thesis, either. However, since I do not want to pick and choose whatever quotes seem most fitting to this thesis and its phenomenological inquiries, I shall instead summarise Rothko's relevant viewpoints and cite him occasionally, so that these summaries may be connected to Crowther's phenomenology in the following chapter. I shall adhere to this method for *Writings on Art* as well.

First of all, Rothko's opinion on the function of art was that it was to be more than just an artist's creation. Art, to Rothko, was a social action, which means that he considered it to be a type of communication.<sup>82</sup> He acknowledges that an artist might create art for himself, but by enriching himself in this manner – for Rothko considers the creation of art to be a contribution to one's development as a human being<sup>83</sup> - artworks also contribute to the world in a direct manner. Creating art is therefore always a social action, because no matter the motivation for creating the artwork, it adds to the world (and its societies). Rothko continuously emphasises the aspect of communication in art, even going so far as to say that art is a 'language'.<sup>84</sup> Rothko considers a painting to be a statement of the painter's notions of reality in terms of 'plastic speech' (painterly materials serving as communicators).<sup>85</sup> The painter would use this 'plastic speech' to invite a spectator into the canvas. This is where the bilateral communication starts: a painter presents his materials and his style, and the 'spectator' is then invited to 'step into' the canvas and communicate with it.<sup>86</sup> Rothko believes that it is impossible to capture the meaning of a painting in spoken or written words.<sup>87</sup> Words are subject to interpretations based on an individual's associations. These interpretations of an oral or written description might come close to a painting's meaning, but interpretations will always be subjective, and can therefore never capture the original message.<sup>88</sup> It is likely that Rothko's reasons for emphasising *art* as a language and the artist's materials as its 'speech' are linked with his view on words – which cannot capture the painting's meaning – in that the artwork and its formal qualities are the sole communicators of Rothko's message. Oral and written language would not do Rothko's

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<sup>82</sup> Rothko, 2004, 10: Rothko on art as a social action: "Art is not only a form of action, it is a form of *social* action. For art is a type of communication, and when it enters the environment it produces its effects just as any other form of action does."

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. Rothko on art: "We have seen that men insist upon producing art as a fulfilment of the biological necessity for self-expression."

<sup>84</sup> Rothko, 2004, 14

<sup>85</sup> Rothko, 2004, 22

<sup>86</sup> Rothko, 2004, 47: Rothko, on the artist and the spectator: "Actually, the artist invites the spectator to take a journey within the realm of the canvas. The spectator must move with the artist's shapes in and out [...] and, if the painting is felicitous, do so at varying and related intervals."

<sup>87</sup> Rothko, 2004, 49: Rothko on words and art: "Thus we cannot duplicate the statement of a painting in words. We can only hope to arouse with our words a train of similar associations, but these are subjective to the spectator and in no way duplicate the original statement."

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

paintings justice, whereas painterly speech would. Perhaps this is also why he chose not to title his paintings anymore.

Returning to art as a social action: Rothko, at the start of his book, may have considered art to be a social action because of its contribution to society. However, I would argue that as his thoughts developed over the years, beyond *The Artist's Reality*, he started clearly stating the fact that the communication also took place on a smaller scale, and much more directly than *Artist vs. Society*, instead focusing on how one painting might affect a single viewer.<sup>89</sup> Even in the book itself, it seems that as one progresses through the text, Rothko wants to emphasise the situation of individual spectators looking at individual canvases.<sup>90</sup> Either way, in *The Artist's Reality*, Rothko quite clearly states what the *purpose* of this communication is: on the very last page of his unfinished manuscript, he writes that the function of art is to 'express and to *move*'.<sup>91</sup>

In summary, Rothko's philosophy on the purpose of art as expressed in *The Artist's Reality* consists of two basic elements: for one, art is a language, as it is a social, communicative action *and* a social activity, for art demands spectators. Second, this communication is the result of the artwork expressing something, and moving the viewer as a result. If we combine these two aspects of Rothko's philosophy, we must conclude that in Rothko's view, the art language is one that must resonate with the (individual) viewer in order to communicate. An artist may invite a spectator to step into the canvas, communicating through their 'plastic speech', the viewer may listen to what is being said. They must 'hear' what the canvas has to say in order to take part in a dialogue with it.<sup>92</sup>

We already know that Rothko was hesitant to expose his paintings to the public throughout most of his career, for he distrusted the public's potential treatment of his canvases.<sup>93</sup> He was aware that a viewer's perception of the artwork is almost entirely dependent on their personal preferences in art and on their personal lives in general. In a chapter discussing the opinions on Giotto of Bernard

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<sup>89</sup> Christopher Rothko believes that his father's paintings were very much intended to be looked at by one person at a time, in a private setting. His writing implies that people crowding in front of one of his father's paintings borders on blasphemy. (Rothko, 2015, 135)

<sup>90</sup> However, as the manuscript was edited extensively by Christopher Rothko, one cannot be sure whether or not the current order of the text is the same as Rothko's original manuscript. I personally believe that Christopher Rothko kept as much of the order intact as possible, as the chapters are cohesive and occasionally refer back to what was written previously. These references, I believe, are not Christopher Rothko's own.

<sup>91</sup> Rothko, 2004, 129

<sup>92</sup> Whether or not there is a clear order for the communicative process remains unclear. Christopher Rothko writes that looking at 'a Rothko' is a *process*, and takes time. (Rothko, 2015, 7) This implies that there are 'steps', even if these are not explicit. Although the communicative process, that is, the artist's invitation and the viewer's consummation of the artwork, might be happening all at once, the process of 'getting to know' of Mark Rothko's paintings – or, having a 'full' dialogue, as far as this is possible – takes more time.

<sup>93</sup> Rodman, 1957, 92-94

Berenson and Edwin Blashfield – an art historian and an artist respectively – Rothko writes that ‘their preferences for [touch- or vision-based art] are the result of particular prejudices that are dependent upon their own particular interests in art and in criticism’.<sup>94</sup> This, of course, is a discussion between two specific individuals, and perhaps it is dangerous to say that this statement is applicable to other people. However, Rothko was evidently keenly aware of the fact that different people have different preferences. This means that people who have differing art-related preferences will also respond differently to paintings. Rothko knew that modern art, like all art that came before it, is a product of its time, and that the reception of this product is dependent on prevalent attitudes during this time: ‘[...] art is inescapably entwined with all the intellectual processes of the age in which it is functioning.’<sup>95</sup> Surely, he remained aware of this when his art became abstract years later.

Moving away from Rothko’s views on art and its audience, we come to his opinions on art and subject matter. For one, he makes the important distinction between *subject* and *subject matter*. The ‘subject’ has to do with the meaning of, or what the artist intended to express in, the picture. ‘Subject matter’ deals with what is depicted, in the sense that it refers to what is formally represented on the canvas, and not the possible meaning behind this representation.<sup>96</sup> If we were to take Rothko’s color-fields as an example, such as *Untitled* (1964, fig. 13), we might say that we do not know its subject, but we *do* know that its subject matter consists of a red background with a black and red rectangle ‘floating’ in front of it.

As far as Rothko’s ‘ultimate subject’ goes, as stated in the introduction to this thesis, his goal was to depict something ultimately human. In *The Artist’s Reality*, Rothko states that tragedy and death are universal human experiences, which connect all humans to each other.<sup>97</sup> Earlier, in this same chapter on ‘Emotional and Dramatic Impressionism’, Rothko argued that the quality of a certain mood is dependent upon the usage of light in a painting, for painterly emotion is often associated with a certain amount of light.<sup>98</sup> For example, a playful, happy scene is typically glowing with bright lighting, whereas tragic or melancholic scenes are usually much darker. At this point in Rothko’s career, he strongly believes in the power of ‘light mood’ as a bearer of emotional tragedy, which he considers to

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<sup>94</sup> Rothko, 2004, 45

<sup>95</sup> Rothko, 2004, 112

<sup>96</sup> Rothko, 2004, 76: Rothko on subject and subject matter: “[Subject matter] may refer to the recognizable elements in a picture, [...] The word *subject* itself will denote the design or the intent of the painting as a whole.”

<sup>97</sup> Rothko, 2004, 35-36; Rothko on the tragic element: “Let us just briefly state that pain, frustration, and the fear of death seem the most constant binder between human beings [...] it is through the tragic element that we seem to achieve the generalization of human emotionality.”

<sup>98</sup> Rothko, 2004, 34: Rothko on light mood: “The quality of this mood is dependent upon the association of certain specific emotions with the effects of light.”

be profoundly human.<sup>99</sup> I shall return to this later, for his interest in the tragic did not subside, and his usage of ‘light mood’ retains its importance and purpose in expressing emotional tragedy. To Rothko, the ‘plastic message’ and the subject are inseparable, especially when it concerns the formal quality of light and its relation to depicting the tragic.<sup>100</sup>

As has been mentioned earlier, Rothko may have foreseen his departure from ‘the figure’, possibly already in this book. His ‘human subject’ – the universal, worldly element – was not clear enough in his figurative works, and Christopher Rothko remarks that the early works are only saying what the later works will declare with much more authority and certainty.<sup>101</sup> At one point in the book, Rothko discusses the ‘depiction of the myth in the plastic image’.<sup>102</sup> Here, he is literally discussing Greek myths, and he writes that Greek artists’ depiction of Gods – no matter how human they looked – were never attempts to produce the appearance of a man, but rather a ‘reference to the genre of man’.<sup>103</sup> In relation to Rothko’s struggle with the figure, as well as a subject which was both emotionally evocative and intrinsically human, this is very interesting. His son writes that this paragraph especially is very important in relation to painting, as Rothko is essentially saying that a painting is never about producing a particular image or scene, but rather an idea, a *vision* of the world.<sup>104</sup> We may refer to what Rothko previously said about artists: their art is a statement on their notions of reality. They do not paint an image: they are painting their ideas, realities and notions of the world.

Finally, we come to the final aspect of Rothko’s subject, and with that, the end of his artist’s philosophies as they were recorded in *The Artist’s Reality*. The notion that artists are painting ideas or notions of reality and not images per se is especially interesting when one considers Rothko’s abstract works. In abstract art, there is no reference to the ‘genre of man’, or any other genre of reality. Rothko wanted to capture something tragic, and depict something essentially human, neither of which would be relatable to real-life elements or recognisable as such. Rothko wrote, some ten to fifteen years before he started making abstract works, that modern artists’ abstractions had stripped paintings from all human associations.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, he continues, paintings have been

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<sup>99</sup> Rothko, 2004, 37

<sup>100</sup> Rothko, 2004, 77: Rothko on the plastic message and the subject: “Therefore, in all works of art we find that the marriage between the two – that is, the plastic message and the subject – is absolute.”

<sup>101</sup> Rothko, 2015, 96

<sup>102</sup> Rothko, 2004, 91-101

<sup>103</sup> Rothko, 2004, 97

<sup>104</sup> Rothko, 2015, 100-101

<sup>105</sup> Rothko, 2004, 110; based on the context of this chapter, I think I can safely say that ‘human associations’ can be used interchangeably with ‘worldly associations’. By default, associations that humans have with or of each other, also have to do with the world they live in.

carried into the realm of the subconscious, and artists have attempted to unify these two components: art which is entirely free from human associations, and art which, at the same time, exists in the realm of the human subconscious. At this point, somewhere around 1940, Rothko believed that artists are still miles away from achieving the unification of these two worlds.<sup>106</sup>

This is interesting. We know that, later in his career, Rothko was very interested in eliminating all external factors from the artwork-viewer interaction, therefore also stripping it of certain human associations. One might consider the fact that his own turn to abstraction was a (successful) attempt at unifying art which has no associations, with art which requires a spectator (a 'sensitive observer') in order to be conversed with. Rothko, concluding his chapter on modern art in *The Artist's Reality*, wrote that 'critics had often accused modern art of losing contact with the human spirit' and that it was 'no longer able to interpret human feeling'.<sup>107</sup> 'This may be so', Rothko wrote,<sup>108</sup> and it is my belief that his musings on this particular subject are what would eventually drive him to create an abstract art which would communicate much more directly with the viewer.

This concludes Rothko's relevant philosophies in *The Artist's Reality*. We may now move on to the selected writings in *Writings on Art*. Most of these texts were written by Rothko himself, although there are a few excerpts and notes from interviews, transcribed by the interviewers. The book spans a time period of about 35 years, the first publication having been written in 1934, and the last in 1969. Again, a selection has been made of texts most relevant to this thesis. The most important points of each shall be summarised below.

The first text to be discussed is Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb's 'letter to the editor', written in 1943. During this time, Rothko's art was nearly fully abstract, but not quite, most closely resembling surrealism. In their letter to the editor of the *New York Times* Rothko and his friend and fellow artist Adolph Gottlieb talk about what they call their 'aesthetics beliefs'. For one, they repeat a point made previously in Rothko's own book: that art cannot be put into words.<sup>109</sup> Even more importantly, they wrote that '[our paintings]' explanation must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker'.<sup>110</sup> A picture's significance will be lost if the viewer is unwilling to converse with it, a stance that Rothko has – at this point – had for several years, and would keep until his final years. Two other points in the letter are important: for one, Rothko and Gottlieb believed it is the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Rothko, 2004, 112

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Rothko & Gottlieb, 1943, 2: "No possible set of notes can explain our paintings."

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

artist's duty to show a viewer the world through their eyes, instead of echoing that of the viewer.<sup>111</sup> This, too, is a statement that Rothko had made before, with slightly different words: 'a painting is a statement of the painter's notions of reality'.<sup>112</sup> Secondly, a painting can only be a 'good painting' if it has a subject, for there is no such thing as a good painting about nothing,<sup>113</sup> once more a sentiment that partly echoes earlier words, as Rothko previously stated that the plastic element and the subject are inseparable. In Rothko and Gottlieb's opinion, it is not even possible to paint a picture about nothing, as there would effectively be nothing on the canvas.<sup>114</sup> Christopher Rothko also emphasises this point, saying that his father's later abstractions are not voids, even if one does not recognise the presented subject.<sup>115</sup>

The second text, 'The romantics were prompted', was written in 1947. It is around this time that Rothko was painting his *multiforms*, which would eventually lead to the famous sectional works. In this short text, too, Rothko primarily discussed how he perceived his own works (as dramas), but he also writes a paragraph 'on shapes'. Most importantly, he wrote that '[shapes] have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms'.<sup>116</sup> Now, this was written in 1947, meaning that Rothko's sectional works haven't come into being yet, but his *multiforms* have, meaning that his art is now entirely abstract. Rothko thinks of the shapes on his canvases as organisms, meaning that the artworks are essentially alive. He also acknowledges that while his paintings do not contain any visually recognisable elements, there is *something* there for the viewer to experience. I shall return to this statement and its phenomenological connotations later.

A very brief statement of Rothko's once again emphasises his intent to create a strong interaction between viewer and artwork, one which would be free of cultural associations. In 'Statement on his attitude in painting', written in 1949, he states that an artist's progression is one towards 'clarity': 'toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer'.<sup>117</sup> The 'idea', we may assume, is whatever is on the canvas. Examples of 'obstacles' which Rothko refers to are, among others, memory, history or geometry.<sup>118</sup> Although I hesitate to use the word 'pure', as Rothko detested the idea of artistic purity (such as employed by De Stijl

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Rothko, 2004, 22

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> And as such, it would not qualify as a painting.

<sup>115</sup> Rothko, 2015, 6

<sup>116</sup> Rothko, 1947, 84

<sup>117</sup> Rothko, 1949, 114

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

artists), it appears that he is looking for the purest, most immediate type of communication between viewer, artist and artwork, unhindered by any sort of external factor *or* knowledge.

In another brief statement, which the artist originally wrote for a symposium at the MoMa, Rothko said that he painted large, monumental canvases because he wanted them to be intimate and human. He said that ‘however you paint a larger picture, you are in it.’<sup>119</sup> His canvases were not only meant to be conversed with, but also to be experienced in a manner that meant that one would no longer be in the ‘real world’. For a moment, the viewer would be contained within the painting’s own space. This, too, I shall return to in the next chapter.

Rothko’s conversation with Selden Rodman in 1956, of which a transcription was published in 1957, reveals Rothko’s enormous distrust of the broader public.<sup>120</sup> This was the well-known conversation in which Rothko talked about wanting to express basic human emotion, and stated the fact that people wept before his painting was evidence of the fact that he *communicated* those feelings.<sup>121</sup> This emphasis on communication was essential, for he ended his conversation with Rodman by saying that if viewers were only moved by the colour relationships in his paintings, then they had missed the point entirely.<sup>122</sup> In this conversation, Rothko rebels against being called an abstractionist, against being linked to the abstract expressionist movement, and against having his paintings formally analysed. The *only* thing that truly seems to have mattered was the relationship between his artworks and his viewers. He deliberately chose not to elaborate on what his part was in establishing this relationship. Other than the fact that he created the paintings, we do not know – and likely never will – the thought process behind the choice of colour and form intended to capture ‘basic human emotions’.

In his address at the Pratt Institute in 1958, he reiterated that art is not about self-expression, but that ‘art is a communication about the world to someone else’.<sup>123</sup> With this remark, he quite literally repeats a point that he had made some twenty years before in *The Artist’s Reality*, and again in his and Gottlieb’s letter to the editor in 1943. This is one of Rothko’s ideas which remain almost entirely the same throughout the years. By now, we can say that communication is the most important aspect of Rothko’s work, at least according to the artist himself, even if his means of achieving this

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<sup>119</sup> Rothko, 1951, 104

<sup>120</sup> Rodman, 1956, 92: Rothko on exposing his paintings to the public: “It is a risky business to send a picture out into the world. How often it must be impaired by the eyes of the unfeeling and the cruelty of the impotent who could extend their affliction universally!”

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Rodman, 1957, 94

<sup>123</sup> Rothko, 1958, 125

interaction changed over the course of his career. Interestingly, during his address at the Pratt Institute, he also said that the tragic was ever-present in his mind, and he knew when it was achieved on canvas. He was, however, unable to point it out. It could not be put into words, and we once again hear an echo of earlier words: 'No possible set of notes can explain our paintings',<sup>124</sup> written in the letter to the editor. The tragic, then, is one of the elements of Rothko's work which can only be felt, experienced or seen through lengthy communication with the work.

This, finally, concludes this paper's section on Rothko's writings on art. In the following chapter, these points elaborated above shall all be discussed in relation to Paul Crowther's phenomenology, as it was formulated in chapter two. First off, I shall once more define central phenomenological terms/concepts used in this essay, and then discuss Rothko's views on art, one by one. All will then be connected to Crowther's phenomenology, after which, in chapter four, we shall move on to two texts which, similar to this paper, have also discussed phenomenology in relation to Rothko.

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<sup>124</sup> Rothko & Gottlieb, 1943, 2

### III. Rothko and Crowther: a new approach to Rothko and phenomenology

Let us start with shortly defining this paper's phenomenological groundwork once more. First of all, Crowther's phenomenology 'centres on descriptions of how the relation between subject and object of experience changes character on the basis of different modes of perception and action'.<sup>125</sup> In other words: the ever-changing character of the relationship between subject and object of experience. A term closely aligned with this is *phenomenological depth*, which was defined earlier as 'the way in which an artwork embodies complex relations and exchanges between the viewer and the perceived object'. In my opinion, notions closely related to phenomenological depth can be found in most of Rothko's writing, but we shall look at this later.

In chapter two, six important concepts were outlined, which shall be defined again below, starting with formative aesthetic power: this entails the 'aesthetic' (style) of an artwork, which determines and alters the way it is perceived. The artist's handling of his materials is crucial to the perception of the work, as any subject that he might express is significantly altered by the representation of that subject. In short: style functions as a bearer of meaning. Secondly, intrinsic significance is a term closely linked to formative aesthetic power. Intrinsic significance refers to the idea that an artwork carries meaning and significance in itself, regardless of the subject of said artwork. The making of and the materials of which it consists, give the artwork meaning in and of themselves.

The concept of the presumption of virtuality is different from formative aesthetic power and intrinsic significance, in that it has slightly more to do with the viewer and less with the artwork. This concept relates specifically to abstract art, which – for its lack of visually recognisable elements – constitutes a presumption in its viewer that there is something at play which they cannot see. The viewer will attempt to find an aspect or element to the artwork which they recognise or understand, or attempt to substitute it with an element from their own lives. The presumption of virtuality leads us to the concept of virtual space, which refers to the space created by the (abstract) artwork through figure-ground relations. For to perceive something is to perceive it in relation to 'something else', meaning that one will consider the artwork (the *figure*) in relation to its immediate surroundings (the *ground*). Due to the presumption of virtuality – which is the cause of, and therefore inseparable from virtual space – this 'space' is where the viewer will attempt to relate what they are seeing (in the artwork's virtual space) to the real, perceptual world. The virtual space of an artwork is created when an artwork is remarkable enough – in any possible sense – to be noticed *apart* from its surroundings,

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<sup>125</sup> Crowther, 2012, 3

where figure-ground relations suddenly become noticeable.<sup>126</sup> In the case of an abstract artwork, this may be due to the fact that one cannot recognise what is being presented, and thus the work warrants closer inspection.<sup>127</sup>

The concept of the object horizon pertains to the scope of cultural and historical knowledge and experience which determines the given character of an object. An object's horizon is what ultimately determines how we perceive and handle the object. For example: the object horizon is the deciding factor in whether we perceive an apple as a fruit, or as the cause of the fall of man. The first association to come to mind, whichever that is, is the result of the object horizon. Finally, the concept of contextual space refers to a realm of expectations centred on details and possibilities, which inform the character of everyday visible reality – either implicitly or explicitly – but without being immediately visible under normal circumstances. In order to recognise an object 'in the fullest sense', we require a contextual space of unnoticed or hidden aspects of the object, as well as the object's relation to what is not given (immediately) in the visual field.<sup>128</sup> This includes associations of the viewer. For the seven levels of contextual space, I refer to page thirteen of this thesis. The essential point is that each level of contextual space is an interpretative perspective which can be taken on any visual object.

Now that I have briefly addressed each phenomenological concept, I would like to move on to the similarities and connections between Rothko's writing and Crowther's phenomenology. In order to clarify some points made in this discussion, a phenomenological analysis shall be made. This analysis shall be written throughout this chapter in relation to each phenomenological concept – instead of occupying several paragraphs of its own – and serves to more clearly illustrate some of the points and connections made in the discussion of Crowther's phenomenology and Rothko's writings. The analysis shall refer to only one of Mark Rothko's paintings: *Untitled (Red over Black on Red)* (fig. 13), painted in 1964, which shall henceforth be referred to as *Red over Black on Red*.

First and foremost, it should be noted that Rothko's clear intent to have his canvases communicate something – emotion, the tragic, the human – to the viewer shows a preliminary and inadvertent,

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<sup>126</sup> Crowther, 2009, 80-81

<sup>127</sup> Crowther himself argues (Crowther, 2009, 80-81) that if a painting is of 'artistic interest', it will resist assimilation into its surroundings and thus create its own virtual space. Although I cannot be entirely sure what he means by 'artistic interest', as he does not elaborate, I would argue that the surroundings themselves also play a significant role. An abstract work in a museum elicits an entirely different response than an abstract work in a hospital, dentist's office or even inside of a home. The abstraction is certainly an important element of an abstract artwork's virtual space, due to the presumption of virtuality created by this abstraction, but I reject the idea that an artwork's formal qualities are the *sole* reason for it.

<sup>128</sup> Crowther, 2009, 107-108

but practical application of phenomenological depth. If phenomenological depth refers to the way an artwork embodies complex relationships between the viewer and the artwork, then we may safely say that Rothko was working towards achieving such depth, even if he had no knowledge of the phenomenological aspects of his work.<sup>129</sup> Rothko's goal was to converse with his viewer through his artworks, meaning that the paintings embody this (complex) conversation.<sup>130</sup> On more than one occasion we have read about his ideas on art as a language, and how he communicated through his works. If we look at how his philosophies developed over the years alongside his artworks, we can also clearly see that he was working towards a more direct communication, something that Christopher Rothko concurs with in his book.<sup>131</sup>

It should go without saying that the way in which a painting embodies complex relationships is (largely) dependent on the formal qualities of the painting. As Mark Rothko's sectional works are generally quite similar in terms of geometrical shapes and the arrangement of these shapes, we may consider *Red over Black on Red* indicative of the phenomenological depth present within a significant portion of his overall oeuvre. This work, which is located in the modern art museum of *Centre Pompidou* in Paris – a 'white cube' museum as described in the introduction to this paper – will serve as an example of the phenomenological depth embodied by Rothko's sectional works. First, the viewer will enter the room where *Red over Black on Red* is hung, likely immediately noticing its vivid reds contrasting with the room's white walls. The red colours are internally – that is, within the painting itself – contrasted by a large, black rectangle. This canvas was granted an additional title, as it was originally *Untitled*, but it only tells the viewer what colours are on the canvas, and how they are arranged upon it. The painting has clear bilateral symmetry: it could be split right down the middle and either half would look like the near-perfect<sup>132</sup> opposite of the other. Due to this symmetry, as well as the painting's rather monumental size (205 x 193 centimetres), viewers may be tempted to position themselves in front of the canvas in a specific manner (fig. 14). In doing so, their (peripheral) vision will be occupied entirely by the canvas. This effect was likely intended by Rothko, and one of his aforementioned quotes bears repeating: 'however you paint a larger picture, you are

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<sup>129</sup> In a theoretical sense, that is. Rothko was well aware that his works had complex relationships with his viewers, but (as far as I can tell) he did not know about the theory of phenomenology.

<sup>130</sup> Rothko, 2015, 20

<sup>131</sup> Rothko, 2015, 21, 28, 96, 101, 163

<sup>132</sup> Geometrically, at least. I am taking into account that there are certain shifts within the colours of the painting that are not 100% the same on either side, but one would have to get very close to the painting to notice this. At first glance, and likely for a while after, the painting looks entirely symmetrical.

in it.<sup>133</sup> The positioning of the viewer is one of the aspects of the complex relationships embodied by the canvas.

Although the colours of the canvas also play a significant role in the establishing of phenomenological depth, the effects of colour are much harder to pinpoint than the effects of form. The effects of the previously mentioned 'light mood' in order to create a strong contrast, which in turn may lead to the emphasis of various forms on the canvas, is perhaps the most important aspect of colour.<sup>134</sup> The contrast between the black rectangle and its red background, as well as the red rectangle placed underneath the black, creates a strong, perceptual focus on the darkest shape on the canvas. Furthermore, another important aspect to the phenomenological depth of Rothko's works is the 'human element', the worldly and universal which Rothko tried to express in his paintings. Christopher Rothko has argued that it is not colour, but form which dictates the 'action' on the canvas, as well as the human element.<sup>135</sup> He has noted that his father's choice of shape – the rectangle – was a very deliberate choice, as it was the most recognisable and natural shape to the human eye.<sup>136</sup> It is unobtrusive, but *not* unimportant to the canvas, as the rectangle is very similar to human vision. The scope of human vision is a cross between an oval and a rectangle, where a rectangle is supposedly visually less obtrusive and less distinct to the human eye.<sup>137</sup> Mark Rothko's usage of easily recognisable, *familiar* shapes is essential to the phenomenological depth embodied by his paintings, as the complex relationship between Rothko's artworks and his viewers is at least partially based on an element of recognition. The viewer's inherent familiarity with what is presented on the canvas – a type of facsimile of human vision – is, among other things, what establishes the common ground for viewers to establish a connection and communicate with the canvas.

Now that the analysis of the painting's formal aspects contributing to phenomenological depth has been made, we shall now move on to the specific phenomenological concepts in relation to Mark Rothko's writing, where analyses shall be made (again relating to *Red over Black on Red*) to shed light upon the various concepts. First, there is Rothko's belief that an image is an artist's statement on their notions of reality, presented through their 'plastic speech'. This can be connected to Rothko's

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<sup>133</sup> Rothko, 1951, 104

<sup>134</sup> Certainly, this does not do justice to the use of colour entirely. It is, however, near impossible to go into colour theory and its phenomenological importance, as colour itself (that is, specific hues; not contrast and brightness) has strongly varying connotations depending on cultural, historical and religious contexts. The phenomenological significance of colour can, in my view, only be explored in *specific* circumstances, but it seems futile and impractical to study this aspect phenomenologically for Rothko's *entire* oeuvre. Therefore, in dealing with colour in Rothko's work, I shall limit myself to brightness, contrast and placement, and not the specific hues that are used.

<sup>135</sup> Rothko, 2015, 52-72

<sup>136</sup> Rothko, 2015, 56

<sup>137</sup> Rothko, 2015, 57

belief that a painting's meaning cannot be put into words, as it would diminish the painting's true meaning, and distract from a clear communication with the artwork. At the core of these two convictions are two basic principles: one, the painting's formal qualities (the 'plastic' elements) carry meaning, and two, true meaning and communication are inherent to the painting itself, and any external factors – such as words, or text – take away from its meaning and the communicative process that is taking place. At first, it may now seem obvious to connect these ideas of Rothko's to both formative aesthetic power and intrinsic significance, for the 'style' (plastic *speech*) is a bearer of meaning to Rothko as well, and the painting's inherent significance is also emphasised by Rothko. However, there is a minor discrepancy between Crowther's phenomenological concept of formative aesthetic power and Rothko's idea that a painter's plastic speech is a representation of his notions of reality. This is the fact that Crowther emphasises that the *perception* of an artwork is different depending on the style used. Crowther's approach is more historical and less opinionated than Rothko's, where Crowther is also highlighting differences in style as a phenomenological phenomenon. Additionally, Crowther is writing in order to develop a theory that can be applied to a wide variety of artworks, whereas Rothko's texts are more philosophical, personal and much less theoretical. Rothko does not discuss whether or not a painter's notions of reality are perceived differently depending on what *kind* of 'plastic speech' he is using. Therefore, while we may definitely note the similarity between Rothko's philosophy and Crowther's phenomenology, we must do so with care, and not assume that Rothko would have thought the same thing regarding matters of style.<sup>138</sup> As for intrinsic significance, it is my view that Rothko's search for a 'clearer' communication with his viewers (by, among other things, eliminating titles and descriptions) is an exploration into emphasising the painting's intrinsic significance. The painting was to speak for itself. There is no mistaking this part of Rothko's artist's philosophies and I believe it is the strongest link to Crowther's phenomenology. Consider *Red over Black on Red*: the original title was *Untitled*, providing no information about the canvas or its creator. In the end, it is the shapes, the contrasts and the symmetry of the painting which lures the viewer in. The painting's formative aesthetic power and intrinsic significance are what capture the viewer's attention, allowing them to explore the painting with minimal external influences.

Moving on, we come to Rothko's dislike of exposing his paintings to the public, his awareness that different people like different kinds of art, and to his observation that art is always a product of its

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<sup>138</sup> I believe that Rothko was well aware of the fact that different styles convey different meanings, but he never explicates this idea. To me, this is clear because of his own development (style-wise), as he abandoned the figure *specifically* because it did not translate his message well enough to his viewers. However, as he himself did not write this down, this shall remain an assumption of mine.

time. I would like to connect all three of these aspects, which are all addressed in *The Artist's Reality*, to the phenomenological concept of the object horizon. It must, once again, be noted that Rothko likely did not know what phenomenology was, and his philosophies are therefore not theoretically on par with modern phenomenology. However, Rothko's writings reveal that his career as an artist was aimed at establishing phenomenological depth: to have his art establish a line of communication with his viewers. In essence, it is my belief that Rothko was inadvertently writing about (his) art in a manner that is somewhat similar to contemporary phenomenological theory. Rothko himself, however, does not theorise, but his ideas can be aligned *with* phenomenological theories. His thoughts on art in the public sphere illustrate this point: Rothko knew that art objects and the subject matter contained within these objects do not register the same for everyone. The object horizon of an artwork is different depending on who is looking at it, where the artwork is located, and during what time it exists. Rothko's anger towards the Seagram Murals was very much based on the fact that he would be catering to 'rich bastards', whom he hated, but not *just* because of the fact that they were rich: they would not perceive his paintings with the attention that they deserved, especially not within the context of a restaurant, where his paintings would not be the primary object of focus. The diners of the Four Seasons restaurant were not the 'sensitive observers' that Rothko wanted for his paintings, and the restaurant was not the quiet, reflective space where they deserved to hang. In this restaurant, they would have been artworks no more, much less the communicative vessels of human emotion that Rothko had intended them to be. In the Four Seasons restaurant, the object horizon of a Seagram Mural canvas would have been 'wall decoration', which would have removed them from their intended context. Rothko was not at all familiar with the phenomenological concept of object horizon, but his observation that his paintings function as mere decorations – assimilating into the rest of the restaurant's décor – is, at its core, similar to an exploration of an artwork's object horizon. He is aware that *context* is what determines the given character of an art object, and therefore the perception of this object. Again, we briefly turn to *Red over Black on Red*, a painting located in an art museum. Upon seeing this work, there is no mistaking it as ornament or décor: it is very much intended to be looked at as an artwork, to be explored as such. The object horizon of an abstract painting in a museum versus an abstract painting in a restaurant differs because of its context. In a restaurant, the artworks are 'just there' as decorations, while in a museum, they serve a distinct purpose in and of themselves to *be* art. Would *Red over Black on Red* be as noticeable in a dimly lit restaurant, in comparison to the stark white walls of the Centre Pompidou? Most likely not, and more importantly, it would not receive the attention that Rothko felt they deserved.

As was mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, there was a time during Rothko's writing of *The Artist's Reality* when he believed that 'light mood' (i.e. the usage of light in a painting) functioned as the bearer of emotional tragedy. Although he does not return to it in later texts, the contrasts – or lack of contrasts – that are present in his sectional works are still of importance for the mood that the picture conveys. *Red over Black on Red*, too, uses light mood: the dark rectangle in the centre makes the surrounding red 'border' look that much brighter, whereas, in turn, the black looks darker. Again, it is difficult to pinpoint the emotional effects caused by the colours on the canvas, but it can be argued that the black *looks* like an unending void, an emptiness in an otherwise brightly coloured canvas, both of which have tragic connotations. I would connect this to formative aesthetic power, as Rothko clearly states that the quality of a certain mood is dependent upon the effects of light.<sup>139</sup> Therefore, a viewer would perceive a canvas' mood differently if the 'light mood' were different, for the desired effect is not the same. Rothko's description of light and light mood in *The Artist's Reality* is similar to the phenomenological concept of formative aesthetic power.

Rothko's thoughts on subject matter in modern art – mainly the abandonment of the figure, as well as worldly associations in modern art – can hardly be connected to modern phenomenology at all. Rothko never really talked about the viewer's perception in relation to the development of abstract art, thus making it hard to connect his thoughts on subject matter to contemporary phenomenology. At most, his art developed in such a way that its formative aesthetic power and intrinsic significance became much more pronounced. Rothko's continuous abstraction, culminating in his sectional works, is an attempt at art which functions in the subconscious, but is stripped of human associations at the same time. He observed, as some critics at the time also had, that art might have lost its human element. I am of the view that this observation can be taken a bit further, in that he also notices that this means that art is evolving towards a different expression of the human element. This observation, combined with Rothko's art developing towards an entirely abstract type of image, can be considered as an inadvertent, early understanding of formative aesthetic power. Not so much the phenomenological concept, but the idea that a painting's formal qualities can be *just as* significant and understandable as figurative art had been, resonating in the same way, if not even stronger.

This concludes my discussion of *The Artist's Reality* in relation to Crowther's phenomenology. Now, we may look to *Writings on Art*, starting with the letter to the editor, written by Rothko and Gottlieb. One of the most important points made in the letter is that there is no such a thing as a 'good painting

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<sup>139</sup> Rothko, 2004, 34: 'The quality of this mood is based upon the association of certain specific emotions with the effects of light.'

about nothing'. A painting would not even qualify *as* a painting if it were about nothing. Furthermore, the formal elements of the painting (the materials used and the style in which the painting is executed) are inseparable from the meaning of the painting. Here, Gottlieb and Rothko almost literally define formative aesthetic power and intrinsic significance. To them, a painting is significant by virtue of the fact that it is a painting, and the *meaning* of the painting is contained within itself (within its own creation; its formal qualities).

In 'The Romantics Were Prompted', Rothko wrote that '[shapes] have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms'.<sup>140</sup> The central point made here is that in spite of the fact that the viewer cannot *directly* associate anything with the painting, as there is no recognisable image, there are still the 'principle and passion of organisms' that *can* be recognised. Briefly, I would like to argue that this particular statement, combined with Rothko's and Gottlieb's notion that their paintings can only be understood through a prolonged consummation of the artworks, can be placed along the same vein as the phenomenological concept of the presumption of virtuality. There are two reasons for this particular connection: for one, the lack of association while knowing that there must be *something* to be experienced is the basic premise of the presumption of virtuality. Second, the presumption of virtuality relies on the viewers' exploration of the artwork: if they were to ignore the work for lack of care or understanding, then the presumption would never take place. Although Rothko does not state it explicitly here, the viewers must inspect the work closely in order to recognise the passion and principle of organisms, preferably by taking their time to do so.

Unfortunately, Rothko never elaborates on what he means by 'organism' exactly, but one could argue that it means that his paintings are *alive*. This has briefly been touched on before, in the introduction to this paper as well as in this chapter: the arrangement of shapes and colours on the canvas create the illusion of movement and life on the canvas. Let us look to *Red over Black on Red* once again. The shades of red on the canvas are vibrant in more ways than one. Yes, the colours are, indeed, bright and 'lively', but more than that, there is a particular contrast between the vibrant red ground underneath and the red rectangle at the bottom of the canvas. This contrast creates a distinct tension between the red rectangle and its background. At first glance, the rectangle appears much darker than the ground above which it floats, but were it not for its dark outline, this red rectangle's colour would very nearly be the same shade of red as the background. Imagine this rectangle without its dark outline: it would dramatically change the look of the canvas as a whole.

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<sup>140</sup> Rothko, 1947, 84

The outline creates tension and instability.<sup>141</sup> While the black rectangle appears to create a large, looming emptiness in the canvas – almost a void, as mentioned before – these ‘competing’ reds are what create life on the canvas, by forcing the viewer to attempt to distinguish two very similar shades of red from each other. The viewers may be captivated in their attempts to discern what is causing such *life* in this canvas, their eyes darting from one end of the canvas to the other, occasionally stopped dead by the large, black rectangle. This canvas contains a constant flux of movement and motionlessness, which suggests action and organism-like ‘passion’.

I would argue that, because of Rothko’s specific choice of words at the beginning of the previous paragraph – which boils down to ‘you cannot associate anything on a visual level, but you may recognise the vibrancy of the life within my paintings’ – we are looking at a basic notion of contextual space, specifically level four: visuals linked by the imaginative association of elements, instead of a physical correspondence with the world around us. For one, contextual space relies on specific interpretive levels of perception, as well as a prolonged interaction with an artwork. After all, contextual space operates on the grounds that there are (surface) details to a canvas which we cannot see at first glance, during ordinary perception. Gottlieb and Rothko wrote that the meaning of their artworks can only be discerned through a ‘consummated experience’ with the artwork. Initially, upon approaching any of Rothko’s sectional works, one would likely not see more than a few geometric shapes, captured in colours which also reveal nothing about the subject. However, if viewers were to take their time to ‘communicate’ with the work, one might notice the life present in the canvas. There are several aspects of Crowther’s phenomenology which coincide, here: the viewer, present in the artwork’s virtual space, presumes that there is more to the artwork than what meets the eye: the presumption of virtuality. The viewer may then reflect upon themselves – which, according to Christopher Rothko, is the whole point of his father’s paintings<sup>142</sup> - and proceed to apply what they know and feel to the canvas. A quality of life, present by virtue of the artist’s handling of his plastic means, may be one of the associations that the viewer has, even though the canvas is *factually* lifeless. Then, upon spending more time with the canvas, taking it in fully, viewers may notice that there is a particular tension in the canvas. Shapes and colours shift and interact with each other in ways previously unrecognised. Perhaps, looking upon a painting like *Red over Black on Red*, viewers may notice equal parts of life and stillness creating their own particular dynamic tension, but

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<sup>141</sup> This instability is very similar to Crowther’s suggestion of instability, although he argues that it is the cause of the shapes on the canvas (which, concerning *Untitled* (1949), I would agree with), whereas with *Untitled* (1964), I would argue that it is the similar shades of red which cause this instability. Additionally, this is not to say that *without* the dark outline, there would not be any instability. Certainly there would be, but I am of the view that it emphasises the similarity of the reds more than the rectangle would on its own, without its outline.

<sup>142</sup> Rothko, 2015, 38-39

it is tension all the same. Naturally, the canvas itself is unmoving, but to our perception and our minds, it is not. The quality of life is an *imaginative association*. Rothko's comments on what can and cannot be perceived in his works, at first glance or otherwise, attest to this, and can therefore be connected to the basics of Crowther's concept of contextual space.

As has been mentioned before, Rothko spent most of his artistic career looking for a way to communicate basic human emotions as directly as possible. He wrote that he had been working towards an elimination of all obstacles, in order to create a direct line of communication between his paintings and the viewer. He painted life-like canvases because that way, the viewer would always be 'inside' the painting, no matter how they chose to perceive that canvas. Furthermore, Rothko knew that his attempts at communicating were successful, as people wept before his paintings, therefore confirming the tragic feelings that Rothko had attempted to capture and convey. Strangely, it was during his conversation with Rodman that he claimed not to be interested in 'relations of colour or form, or anything else'. It is almost as though Rothko was shifting away from formative aesthetic power, and relying more heavily on the intrinsic significance of his works. Phenomenologically speaking, the complex relationship embodied by the canvas is still very much present, although the emphasis on the formal qualities of the work is now slightly less. The communication, the 'complex relationship' appears to, here, be only aspect to his works that matters, even if Rothko does not (or perhaps cannot) explain where this comes from. I hesitate to take his word as gospel, however, for it is also known that Rothko was of a rather finicky disposition when it came to his art. I very much believe that Rothko still considered the formal qualities of his works – the shapes, colours on, and the size of the canvases – to be very important. Perhaps, when Rodman suggested that Rothko's works boiled down to nothing but colour and form, Rothko felt the need to strongly proclaim that this was not the case, going so far as to disregard these essential aspects of his canvases entirely. We can only speculate on the matter, but I am inclined to take his interviews *specifically* with a grain of salt, for he disliked journalists as much as he disliked critics.<sup>143</sup>

Lastly, we come to Rothko's address at the Pratt Institute, where he said that the tragic in his paintings could not be pointed out, nor could it be put into words. One would simply have to look at the canvas, its shapes and its colours, discover and experience it, as no description could ever do it justice. Rothko also said that he 'knew' when the tragic had been achieved on his canvas, although he would not be able to point it out. As with Rothko's statement on the passion of organisms in his canvases, I believe that the 'tragic' is an imaginative association, and therefore pertains to contextual space. I would refer to *Red over Black on Red* one last time: earlier, the black square was described as

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<sup>143</sup> Additionally, he also refused to be interviewed by Rodman again. (Rodman, 1957, 94)

'emptiness' or 'a void', both of which have tragic or sad connotations. Objectively, there is no void or emptiness in this canvas, as it is covered in paint. Such darkness among bright colours, however, might *suggest* the illusion of emptiness, which in turn might evoke a feeling of sadness, or of tragedy. The 'silence' and stillness of the black rectangle in comparison to the reds on the canvas does feel halting, in the sense that it almost removes life from the painting. Life, incidentally, is also an illusion. Life, death, tragedy: all of these are imaginative associations that one may have upon looking at *Red over Black on Red*, but it does require this specific arrangement of shapes and colours on the canvas, as well as a 'sensitive observer'.

However, it is somewhat unclear whether the tragic is but an *aspect* of Rothko's communication, or rather what he is trying to communicate as at large. Based on the conversation with Rodman, the latter would be the case. If so, I would consider the tragic to be all-encompassing; I would consider it an ambience. Therefore, I would argue that Rothko's capturing of the human tragedy – of a tragic mood – fits the description of a 'generic ambience' (contextual space level four). Color-field paintings are known for their size, often larger than life, and in a sense, they are meant to envelop the viewer. An ambience, tragic or otherwise, is equally encompassing. As such, the size of the canvas serves to exacerbate the potential ambience of the canvas, in this case characterised by the tragic element. Caught within the canvas, the viewer might experience an overwhelming sense of tragedy, although this does not apply to every viewer. Still, Rothko knew that his viewers wept before his paintings and was proud of this fact, taking it as evidence for the tragic content of his artworks.<sup>144</sup> The 'sensitive observer' would experience the tragic through their concentrated perception of the artwork, and perhaps it is not at all relevant whether the tragic is an aspect of the interaction, or the interaction itself.

Before we move on to the next chapter, in which essays written by Espen Dahl and Andrew Jaw Svedlow shall be summarised (after which they shall be compared to my own approach), I would like to reflect on this paper's original purpose: to explore whether or not Rothko's philosophies are comparable to Crowther's phenomenology, in order to create a new methodology, one in which modern phenomenology and an artist's writings are combined. In combining Crowther's phenomenology with Rothko's own texts, one might analyse a Rothko phenomenologically, while simultaneously taking the artist's intent into consideration. Having evaluated most of Rothko's writing from a phenomenological point of view, based on Paul Crowther's theories, I can conclude that Rothko's ideas are indeed somewhat comparable to Crowther's phenomenology. Rothko's work certainly lends itself to a phenomenological analysis, as has become clear throughout this chapter,

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<sup>144</sup> Rothko, 2015, 11

but his ideas on (his own) art also had a lot in common with contemporary phenomenology. It is, however, of the utmost importance to keep in mind that Rothko was not a scholar, and that his philosophies are therefore not theoretically on par with Crowther's theories. Content-wise, they show similarities, in the sense that Rothko was thinking about art and the perception of art in a way that shows some overlap with contemporary phenomenology.<sup>145</sup> I am of the opinion that, when considering Rothko's work phenomenologically, it is especially fruitful to take his own ideas into account. It has become apparent that at the heart of his work is a strong desire to communicate with the viewer, to establish the complex relationship that phenomenology aims to study.

In the next chapter, Dahl's and Svedlow's texts shall be discussed briefly. Their texts on Mark Rothko and phenomenology shall then be compared to Crowther's phenomenology in combination with Mark Rothko in the following chapter. This essay shall then conclude on what the differences between these various studies are.

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<sup>145</sup> The concepts of formative aesthetic power and intrinsic significance are the clearest indicator of this. For example, Rothko's insistence that an artwork's significance cannot be put into words, is similar to the phenomenological idea that an artwork is significant in and of itself.

## 4. Previous essays on phenomenology and Mark Rothko

In this chapter, two texts, by Espen Dahl and Andrew Jay Svedlow, shall be summarised in a concise manner. A basic outline shall be provided, highlighting the essays' most important points. This provides a quick, clear overview of these essays so that they may be compared to this thesis thereafter.

### I. Dahl

Espen Dahl's essay is titled 'Towards a Phenomenology of Painting: Husserl's Horizon and Rothko's Abstraction', and was written in 2010 for the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*. On the first page, he writes that the aim of his article is 'to develop some phenomenological reflections with regard to abstract paintings', and to examine whether or not Husserl's notion of the object horizon can provide insight into the 'mimetic relation between artwork and world'.<sup>146</sup> Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is, along with Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and others, one of the 'founding fathers' of the school of phenomenology, and is indeed responsible for the phenomenological terminology and theory prevalent in phenomenological studies today. Husserl's horizon is given a slightly broader definition by Dahl than Crowther provides in his own book, however. Crowther does not elaborate as extensively on what the object horizon entails, whereas Dahl provides two distinct aspects to Husserl's definition of the horizon:<sup>147</sup> the inner and outer horizon. The inner horizon is the 'infinite plenitude of profiles, sides and qualities pertaining to a particular thing'. The outer horizon is the thing's surroundings in space and time.<sup>148</sup>

Rothko's abstractions, Dahl writes, must have been very confusing to his contemporary audience. He argues that Rothko's viewers found that, once they could associate the horizontal divisions with landscapes, the abstractions became more accessible to them. Part of this accessibility lies within the seemingly inexplicable emotional evocativeness of the abstractions. The emotional impact of Rothko's paintings, along with the perceived similarity to landscapes, caused people to compare his works to William Turner's and Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes.<sup>149</sup> This connection to landscapes made by viewers, unfortunately, happened at the cost of the 'internal exploration' that Rothko and his contemporaries held dear, not to mention that they had certainly not intended for their paintings

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<sup>146</sup> Dahl, 2010, 229

<sup>147</sup> While Crowther's definition of the horizon is not inherently different from Husserl's – and, in fact, contains the entirety of Husserl's definition, as he bases his work off of it – it is simply not defined as elaborately as the definition provided by Espen Dahl.

<sup>148</sup> Dahl, 2010, 235: again, although more elaborately defined, it does not factually or effectively differ from Crowther's notion of the horizon.

<sup>149</sup> Dahl, 2010, 229

to be read as landscapes.<sup>150</sup> The horizon comes into play in part because it ‘designates the unrecognised condition of possibility for recognisable objects to appear’, or, in other words: in spite of the fact that Rothko *did not* paint a landscape, it is possible to recognise one in his paintings. Although Dahl’s essay does not aim to establish a connection between landscapes and Rothko’s paintings, his argument centres on the fact that it was (and still is) a *common experience* to see a Rothko and think of a landscape, which is the result of how people are exposed to object horizons. Dahl aims to elucidate, through both Rothko and the Husserlian definition of the horizon, what the character of this common experience is.<sup>151</sup>

Dahl’s essay deals with what is called – in Husserlian terms – ‘the natural attitude’: an attitude which causes us to never question the existence of the world, nor the individual objects and persons within, thus preventing us from reflecting upon them.<sup>152</sup> The ‘givenness’ of the world must be described as an horizon, for its existence in our lives as a ‘natural’ occurrence largely shapes our context as human beings.<sup>153</sup> Dahl writes that Rothko’s abstraction discloses the world as an horizon, as it is a ‘mimetic dimension’ (imitating but differing from the ‘real dimension’) that reveals what most often is hidden from our daily lives, while simultaneously intertwined with it. Mimesis, in this case, does not imply a direct copy of the physical world. Rather, it implies mimicry of interpersonal relations, which cannot be seen, but are always experienced.<sup>154</sup> Nothing in the painting is recognisable, but that does not mean it is empty.<sup>155</sup> Rothko paints what Dahl describes as ‘the back of the world’: that which is always implied, but never visible to us. Dahl writes that Rothko’s paintings make the otherwise unrecognised components of our perceptual experience obvious. That which we used to take for granted now causes wonder: it has become strange to us.<sup>156</sup> The granted, the familiar, is the object horizon, but as there is nothing to be recognised on the canvas, its horizon eludes us. Dahl: ‘[...] its horizon withdraws as we attempt to capture it.’<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Dahl, 2010, 230

<sup>152</sup> Dahl, 2010, 231

<sup>153</sup> Dahl, 2010, 233

<sup>154</sup> This relates to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century definition of mimesis: “In 20th century approaches to mimesis, authors such as Walter Benjamin, Adorno, Girard, and Derrida have defined mimetic activity as it relates to social practice and interpersonal relations rather than as just a rational process of making and producing models that emphasize the body, emotions, the senses, and temporality.” From:

<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/mimesis.htm> (Website consulted on 08-08-2017)

<sup>155</sup> Dahl, 2010, 234

<sup>156</sup> Dahl, 2010, 237

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

Dahl ends his article with the suggestion that Rothko's paintings 'presuppose' familiarity with the various horizons of the world, and then displays these in artistic expressions.<sup>158</sup> In other words: various histories, contexts and experiences of the world are present in the painting, which explains why some people have such a strong, emotional response to Rothko's canvases. Dahl concludes:

[...] in our everyday engagement in the world, some colours inevitably echo particular practices and typical experiences. We simply cannot help that particular contours become part of what we regard as the style of the world.

This closely echoes Crowther's notion of abstract art as containing transcultural and transhistorical value. At the core of Rothko's abstractions, one finds the universal: an as of yet undefined element that everyone can recognise *something* in, according to Dahl. Furthermore, in the quote above, Dahl clearly describes why Rothko's paintings are, in the human mind, so easily connected to landscapes: these are things – horizons – that we, as people, are confronted with all of the time. A horizon in the natural, physical sense, such as it appears in landscapes, does consist of horizontal layers, of which the upper layer is typically lightest. It is no surprise that some of Rothko's paintings, then, call to mind such associations. Indeed, we cannot help it: previous visual experiences are so ingrained, such as knowing what a landscape – painted or otherwise – typically looks like, that when we are faced with an image that has no immediately obvious object horizon, we attempt to substitute it with what we already know. In the case of Rothko's paintings, this would lead us to associate his paintings with landscapes, although other examples also come to mind, such as windows. In the second to last paragraph, Dahl writes that the point is that 'every colour, line, and colour field harbours its own history'.<sup>159</sup> He describes this as an 'echo chamber of associations', associations which are determined by individual, cultural contexts. Abstract paintings such as Rothko's explicate the horizons that we no longer notice, as they have become 'a given'. The 'givenness' of the world is put into question by abstract paintings.

Having addressed this first essay, we shall now move on to Svedlow.

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<sup>158</sup> Dahl, 2010, 242

<sup>159</sup> Dahl, 2010, 243

## II. Svedlow

Andrew Jay Svedlow's essay is titled 'Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Mark Rothko's Painting' and was published in *Analectica Husserliana* (the yearbook of phenomenological research) in 2008. This text is an analysis of one particular work, specifically *Untitled* (1949, fig. 1), written in the third person omniscient: the author refers to himself as 'the author' and simultaneously describes the complex communication that is taking place between himself and the painting.<sup>160</sup> He also includes a short biography on Rothko. Hermeneutic phenomenology can also be called 'interpretive phenomenology', meaning that it relies heavily upon the interpretation of the author. A direct, personal approach to Rothko's art therefore suits this method very well.

Svedlow approaches the painting as a text that points to the interplay of artist, world and audience.<sup>161</sup> He writes that since it is impossible to describe the 'beyond verbal syntax' of the work, that the written word will have to suffice in describing the painting.<sup>162</sup> An essential point made in the following paragraph is that Svedlow acknowledges that he is 'hardly omniscient' in interpreting the work, but that he is, at the same time, capable of gathering *some* meaning from the canvas. In acknowledging this, the 'consciousness of the self' spreads across the canvas, writes Svedlow, much in the same manner as the layers of light painted by Rothko. Christopher Rothko wrote about the paintings being a reflection of the viewer, and Svedlow's musings about himself in relation to the painting emphasise this point explicitly. Svedlow writes that the basis for the 'existential event', which we may assume is his interaction with the painting, is formed by the interplay and experiencing of the colours on the canvas.<sup>163</sup> The painting's nature is in 'constant flux' as it interacts with the changing nature of the viewer:<sup>164</sup> as Svedlow 'unfolds' his own consciousness and awareness as an author, theorist and viewer, changing his knowledge of self at a moment's notice, the painting's perceived nature changes as well. The material point to Svedlow's analysis is, he writes: "The value is in the quality of the experience that is the interplay between the interpreter and the changing perceived appearance of the painting."<sup>165</sup>

This analysis is deeply personal, but adheres closely to the intimate communication which Rothko desired for his paintings. The phenomenological process is explicated, making an inherently obscure process slightly clearer. Svedlow does not refer to other phenomenological essays, nor is it clear

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<sup>160</sup> Svedlow, 2008, 287

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Svedlow, 2008, 289

whose theory he based his analysis on. This brief essay, of which the larger portion is a biography on Mark Rothko, is a phenomenological analysis of the personal, interpretive kind. It is a phenomenological study in that it aims to describe the value of its own analysis, which is to describe the experience that is the interaction between artwork and viewer.

In the next chapter, the differences between Dahl's phenomenological study of the Husserlian horizon in comparison to Rothko's art, Svedlow's analysis of *Untitled* (1949), and the comparison between Crowther's phenomenology and Rothko's texts, shall be explored.

### III. Comparison and differences: Dahl, Svedlow versus Rothko & Crowther

In this thesis, I have attempted to connect Paul Crowther's phenomenology to Mark Rothko's writings, with additional help from Christopher Rothko's book *Mark Rothko: From the inside out*. By focusing on some of Crowther's post-analytic phenomenological concepts, I was able to conclude that there are similarities, but that Rothko's philosophies and Crowther's theories are not comparable one-on-one, nor do they not need to be. In analysing Rothko's one of Rothko's works, namely *Red over Black on Red* (1964), it became apparent that not only does Rothko's work lend itself to a phenomenological analysis, it can be beneficial to the analysis to take Rothko's own texts into account when analysing his work. Furthermore, Rothko's writings turned out to be comparable and even, on some levels, compatible with Crowther's phenomenology, in the sense that Rothko's ideas could be used together with Crowther's phenomenology in order to analyse Rothko's works.

Espen Dahl's essay is primarily a phenomenological study discussing how the object horizon relates to the real world. Husserlian phenomenology serves as the groundwork for this study, playing a central role in explaining how Rothko's art explicates that which has become implicit to humans. Although Rothko is extensively discussed in relation to the Husserlian concept of the object horizon, Rothko himself, as an artist or as a philosopher, is not discussed in this essay. Husserl's phenomenology serves as the theoretical groundwork for Dahl's essay, while Rothko's *art* is used to further explain the function and concept of the object horizon. Furthermore, Dahl does not discuss or make use of Rothko's own writings at all, rather allowing Rothko's paintings to speak for themselves. Contrary to Dahl's approach, I chose to compare Paul Crowther's phenomenology to Rothko's texts, using the latter as its primary subject, even as a primary source, while Crowther's phenomenology provides the theoretical framework, but whose theories are not discussed much more in-depth otherwise. Furthermore, Dahl specifically focuses on the *object horizon*, its function, and its relation to Rothko's art. In dealing with Crowther and Rothko, a limited set of phenomenological concepts has been used, none of which were inherently more important. Dahl's essay, in that sense, is much more specialised, although Rothko himself – and his texts – are not discussed.

The differences between this thesis and Svedlow's essay are, perhaps, even clearer. For one, Svedlow's phenomenology is not linked to one particular scholar. Dahl's essay was based on Husserlian phenomenology, while this thesis focuses on Crowther's theories. My own research focused explicitly on the connection between contemporary phenomenology and Rothko's ideas about art, whereas Svedlow wrote an intricate phenomenological analysis focused on one particular work. Other than the brief biography provided by Svedlow halfway through the chapter, there are no references to Rothko himself or his writings. In that sense, Svedlow's analysis is somewhat distanced

from Rothko himself, although the connection to Rothko's artwork is very intimate and immediate. Svedlow also does not connect Rothko's art to a particular scholar or theoretical framework: although the analysis is indubitably phenomenological, there are no links to anything or anyone outside of Svedlow himself and the artwork. The analysis Svedlow makes discusses him, his position as a viewer/author/theorist, the artwork, and the shifting relations between the artwork and the author. There are no references to anything outside of the analysis itself.

With that, I would like to move on to the conclusion of this thesis.

## 5. Conclusion

The primary purpose of this thesis was to compare Mark Rothko's artist's philosophies on (the perception of) art to Paul Crowther's phenomenological theories on art. After reading all of Rothko's writings, alongside his son's book, which provided additional commentary, I was able to conclude that at least on a basic level, Rothko's philosophies and Crowther's theories are comparable and compatible. Their compatibility is especially important, because a combination of the two can now be employed for phenomenological analyses. Instead of focusing exclusively on the phenomenological relations between a viewer and the artwork, an analysis may also consider what Rothko himself thought about his art and its relation to the viewer. It can be valuable, in my view, to consider the creator of the artwork alongside the artwork itself, especially in the case of one such as Mark Rothko, who had so much to say about his art. In analysing *Red over Black on Red* (1964) (fig. 13), it became clear that Paul Crowther's phenomenology was well-suited to an analysis of Mark Rothko's work, as the concepts worked well with the formal qualities of Rothko's paintings. Having analysed this work phenomenologically, however, it also became clear that what Rothko had written about art was almost entirely compatible with Crowther's texts. Having considered both Rothko and Crowther's texts, I would conclude that it can be beneficial to an analysis to also include Rothko's ideas about his art. Although the intent behind an artwork can never be definitively ascertained, some of the thought processes – and the execution thereof on the canvas – can be elucidated.

As for the differences between this thesis and previous phenomenological studies: this thesis focuses explicitly on Rothko himself (and specifically, his writings), whereas Espen Dahl's essay considers Mark Rothko's artwork through a large, complex theoretical system. The Husserlian theory employed by Dahl poses a question (dealing with the relation between object horizon and the real world) for which Mark Rothko is a very interesting case study. However, the focus is rather explicitly on Rothko's *artworks*, and not on Rothko's own thoughts on art. The phenomenological inquiry in Dahl's essay deals with phenomenology and the artwork, specifically with how Rothko's art relates to the object horizon. Dahl's essay is a phenomenological study of Mark Rothko's art in and of itself, whereas this paper was aimed at finding a connection between Mark Rothko's ideas and contemporary phenomenology.

Svedlow, too, chose not to consider Rothko's writings, although he does include a short biography alongside his analysis, providing the reader with a clearer picture of the artist. Svedlow's analysis aims to explore the relationship between the artwork and the viewer, focusing specifically on *Untitled* (1949) (fig.1), making use of hermeneutic phenomenology. Svedlow does not mention whose theory his analysis is founded on. The material point of his analysis is to examine the value of

the experience that is the interaction between *Untitled* and the viewer. The main difference between Svedlow's interpretive analysis and this paper is the level of interpretation, as well as the personal stance taken by the author. Although an analysis of one specific artwork was made in chapter 3.3, this analysis was written as objectively and theoretically as possible. In short: the difference between these two analyses is the theoretical system used, as Svedlow employs hermeneutic phenomenology, while I chose to use Crowther's post-analytic phenomenology. Finally, Svedlow is not attempting to find common ground between Rothko and any other theorist: his essay focuses primarily on the analysis and the results thereof.

In conclusion, Mark Rothko's writings contain ideas that are similar to Crowther's modern phenomenological theories. Rothko's ideas, especially those concerning the power of the artist's materials – described by Rothko as 'his plastic speech' – are quite similar to Crowther's concept of formative aesthetic power. Furthermore, Rothko's search for a way to express 'the universal' and 'the tragic', for which he eliminated as many external, cultural factors as possible, can be connected to a search for clear intrinsic significance. It can, in my opinion, be useful to consider Rothko's intent for his artworks, as far as such intent has been stated, when writing an analysis of Rothko's works, as he had a powerful desire to communicate with his viewers through his art. Crowther's phenomenology is applicable to Rothko's art, but considering Rothko's views alongside this phenomenology allows for an even more in-depth consideration of his art.

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7. Image catalogue



Fig. 1: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1949, oil on canvas, 206.7 x 168.6 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Fig. 2: Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, 1948, oil on canvas, 41.2 x 69.2 cm, MoMa, New York City

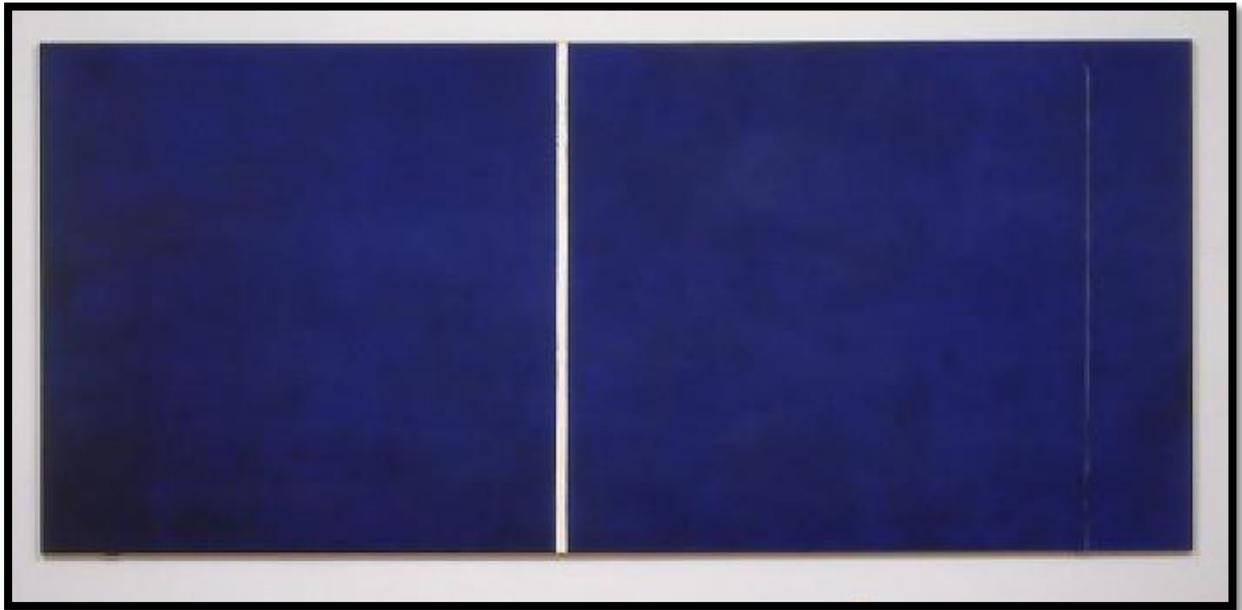


Fig. 3: Barnett Newman, *Cathedra*, 1951, oil on canvas, 243 x 543 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

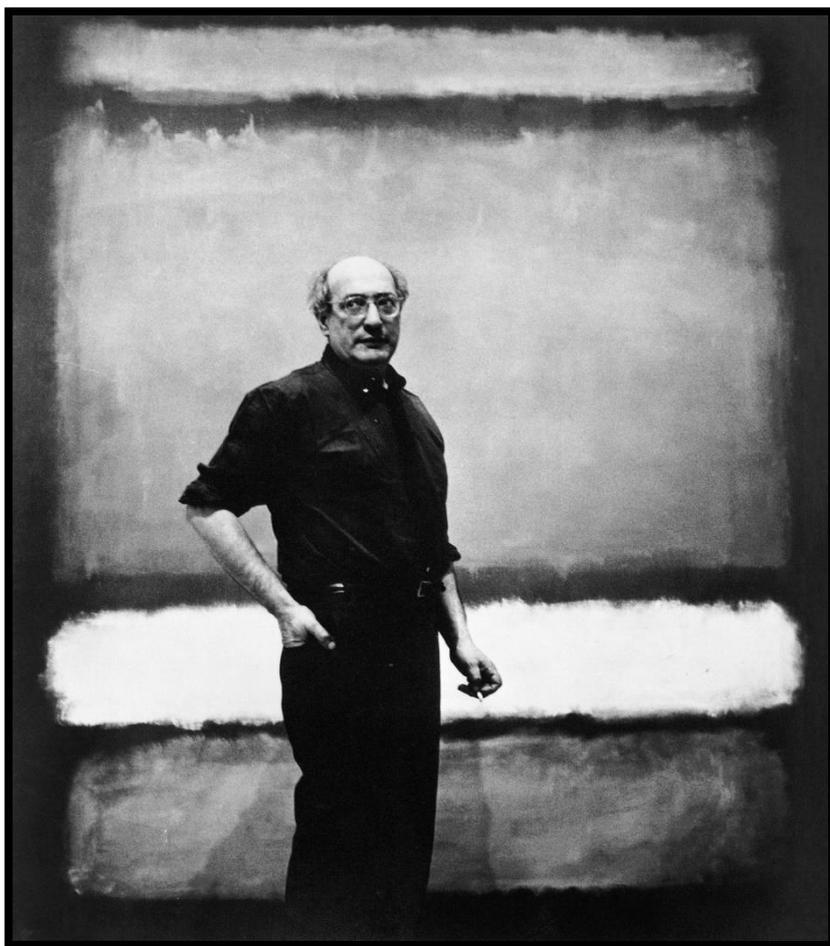


Fig. 4: Mark Rothko before one of his color-field paintings in 1961. Photograph by Regina Bogat.



Fig. 5: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1933/1934, oil on black cloth, 40.3 x 50.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

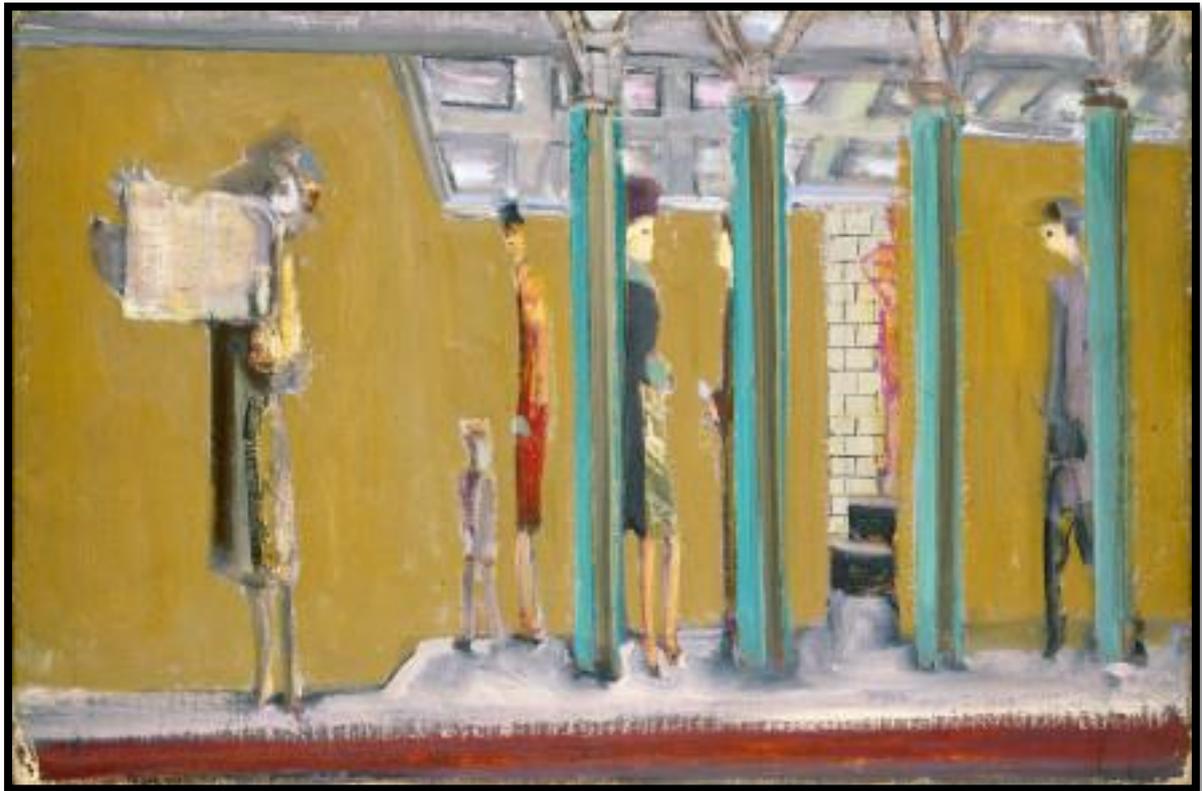


Fig. 6: Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Subway)*, c. 1937, oil on canvas, 51.1 x 76.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Fig. 7: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1941, oil on canvas, 45.8 x 61 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Fig. 8: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1948, oil on canvas, 126.4 x 111.8 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Fig. 9: Mark Rothko, *No. 7 or No. 11*, 1949, oil on canvas, 173 x 111 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Fig. 10: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 137.8 x 173.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

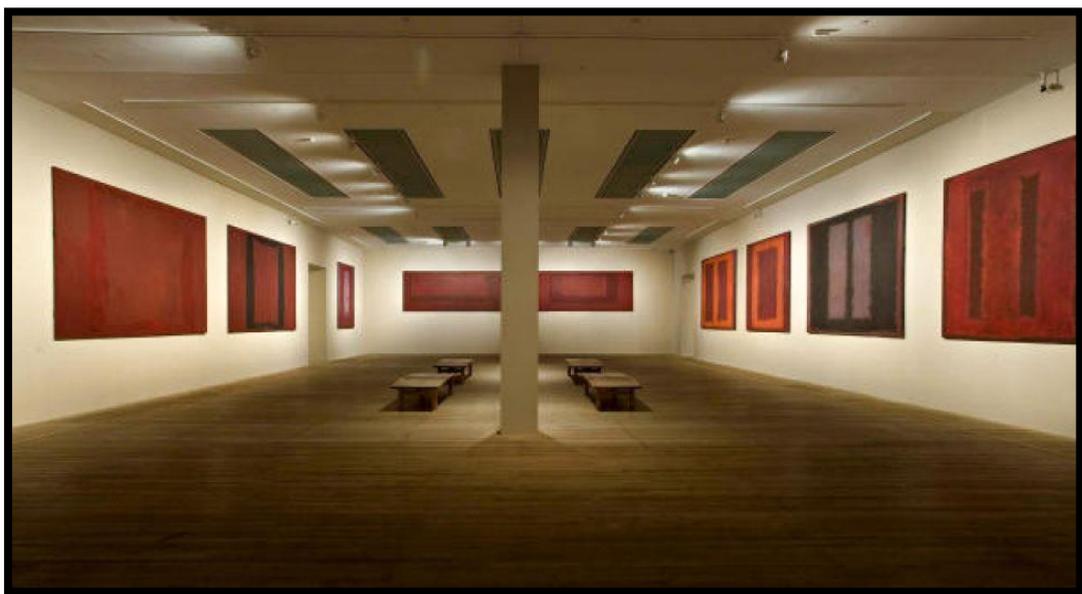


Fig. 11: Mark Rothko, *The Seagram Murals*, 1958-1959, oil on canvas, various sizes, Tate Modern, London



Fig. 12: Mark Rothko, *The Rothko Chapel Murals*, 1964-1967, oil on canvas, various sizes, Rothko Chapel, Houston



Fig. 13: Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Red over black on red)*, 1964, oil on canvas, 205 x 193 cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris



Fig. 14: A museum visitor in front of a Mark Rothko painting at Stedelijk Museum, 2017, Amsterdam. (Picture by the author.)