



PALE GROUND

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A RESPONSE TO THE WORK OF JO McGONIGAL TIM INGOLD (PAINTING THE GROUND)

Painters paint. It has however been a longstanding conceit, in the world of fine art, that the messy business in the studio pales into insignificance beside the final work, hung in the gallery, which people queue up to admire. That, and not what goes on behind the scenes in the practice of preparing canvas and daubing it with pigment, is what we gallery-goers call the painting. Nor do we pay the slightest attention to the walls on which the paintings hang, even though, as a matter of fact, they have been painted too. Once there were men at work in this space, with their paint-cans and brushes, ladders and dustsheets, but they have long since disappeared, all evidence of their presence having been systematically erased. Can you imagine a visitor to the gallery, oblivious to the pictures, exclaiming 'Just look at those walls – perfectly painted; there's scarcely a stain!' No, they have come to see the paintings on the walls.

Why, then, should there be such a concern to hide from view the actual practice of painting, whether of the artist in the studio or of the professionals called in to coat the gallery walls? One reason, perhaps, is to preserve and reinforce the longstanding institutional elevation of the artist, whom we imagine to be in the service of a higher calling, from the lowly tradesman, advertising his services as a 'painter and decorator', who is merely in the business of making a living. There may be all the difference in the world between an artwork and a blank wall, but were we to take a step back, to observe the artist and the tradesman at work, they are not so dissimilar. Both, after all, use brushes and a fluid medium to transform an otherwise bare surface. And for the tradesman as for the artist, this calls for consummate skill, which can take many years to acquire.

If, nevertheless, 'art' painting is truly distinct from 'trade' painting, then where exactly does the distinction lie? There is of course more to both than the application of pigment. The artist has first to layer the surface with multiple coatings of gesso, traditionally mixed from chalk, marble dust and rabbit-skin glue, to establish what is called the 'ground' of the work. But the tradesman does much the same, applying primer in order to seal the surface and improve its binding properties. Both, too, may have to mix paints, initially supplied in a range of standard colours, to achieve the desired hue. Yet it is here that a difference begins to set in. For the artist typically mixes paint on the palette with the brush, prior to every stroke, into variable shades whose subtlety defies the categorizations of even the most comprehensive colour chart. There is nothing like the palette, however, in the tradesman's toolkit. Rather, the paint is mixed, well before the brush comes into play, through a shaking and stirring which ensures that the mixture is homogeneous through and through.

And their brushes differ too. The artist's brushes are thin and long-handled, designed to be held much like a pen or pencil, in a precision grip. The tradesman's brushes, by contrast, come in a range of widths and have shorter handles, allowing the brush to be cradled between the thumb on one side and the four fingers on the other. Consider the moment at which the brush in the painter's hands, freshly reloaded with paint, is about to make contact with the treated surface. The artist is on the point of enacting a precise micro-gesture, a stroke, which will leave a singular mark on the surface. That mark, unique in its gestural formation, intensity and tint, can never be precisely replicated. Unless scraped off or subsequently painted over, it is destined to become an integral part of the overall composition. But the tradesman, with his broad brush, wants to coat the surface, not to mark it. Having loaded the brush with just the right amount of paint that it will flow but not drip or run, he is poised to caress the surface with a steady, patient hand.

Here we come to the nub of the matter. The tradesman is like a magician, whose singular gift lies in the ability to make himself invisible, to leave no sign of having been there and done the work. The properly

painted surface should be unblemished, devoid of brush-marks, runs and smears. Yet in what the tradesman would take to be imperfections, which sully the purity of the work, lies the very possibility of art. For it is from the enduring traces of the brush, as they ruffle the surface, that the work of art is composed. The gifted artist is one whose every stroke carries a certain affective charge, such that the composition as a whole burns with an intensity that leaves no viewer unmoved. Where the trade-painted surface is mute and expressionless, the work of art, we suppose, is testimony to the brilliance of its conception and the virtuosity of its execution, astonishing all who come to see it. And nowhere is the contrast between trade and art more glaring than in the gallery itself, where the artist's paintings hang on typically whitewashed walls.

In one sense, of course, the artwork is no different from the wall. It is simply a surface covered in paint. This is what is revealed to us by a mode of perception that attends to the invariant features of environmental objects, including form, colour and texture. The American psychologist James Gibson, in his treatise on the ecology of visual perception, calls this kind of perception direct.¹ But with the artwork, Gibson argues, it is always accompanied by an apperception of another kind. This is indirect. To switch from direct to indirect perception means shifting our attention from the materiality of the surface to focus instead on the principles of composition. Only then can we see the painting as a painting. It is as if the eye could peel the entire composition, made up of individual strokes, from the ground in which it is embedded, leaving the latter, now stripped of all variation, as a homogeneous substrate akin to the wall that surrounds it. Even as the composition enters the eye, so the ground – having parted company with it – recedes into the distance.

In so far as the painting, thus perceived, has a surface at all, it is no longer the real surface, with its layers of gesso, but a virtual surface, which exists only in the imagination. How else can we convince ourselves that an image of the work, caught on camera and projected onto a blank screen, testifies to the truth, and nothing but the truth, of the original? In our perception, the painting has been comprehensively dematerialised. Indeed, the screen of projection and the white wall of the gallery have much in common. Both are absolutely flat, monotonous and featureless. Like the wall, the screen is the product of a manufacturing process, but it is one that most of us know little about and care even less, since how the screen was fabricated is deemed irrelevant to its functionality. In use, the screen is entirely indifferent to whatever images may be cast on its surface, as are the images to the screen. Neither is marked or even touched by the other.

Nowadays, when screens – whether the plasma screens of televisions or the coated PVC screens of the conference room or cinema – are so ubiquitous in our lives, it is hardly surprising that we import a sensibility trained in their use into the space of the gallery. Yet it was not always thus. For the first screens were of an entirely different nature. To find out more about their origins, we must turn from art to architecture. In a treatise published in 1851, the Hamburg-born architect and historian, Gottfried Semper, proposed a division of architecture into four 'elements': the earthwork, the framework, the enclosing membrane and the hearth. To each, he assigned a particular trade. The mason would build the earthwork; the carpenter would construct the frame; around and over which would be tied a membrane fabricated by the weaver. Finally, the hearth with its fire situates the crafts of ceramics and metallurgy.² Here, we are particularly concerned with the framework and the membrane, and their corresponding trades, of carpentry and weaving.

Semper was convinced that both frame-construction and membrane-weaving shared a common root in the ancient art of knotting and plaiting flexible fibres or withies. Beginning in net-making and basketry, it subsequently evolved in two directions, respectively towards building

and textiles. In the first walls however, plaited from wicker, the two are seamlessly combined. These walls, as much woven as carpentered, were originally intended as lightweight exterior partitions, such as pens designed to keep domestic animals in, or fences around fields and gardens to keep wild animals out. Later, they would become the interior dividing walls of the dwelling house itself. Semper found etymological support for his conjecture that wall-building began with textiles in the fact that the word in German for the interior wall, namely *Wand*, shares the same root as the word for dress or clothing, *Gewand*.³ But he also took care to distinguish these *Wand*-walls from the outer, supporting walls of stone – *Mauer* in German – which he took to be integral to the masonry earthwork.

The idea that wall-building is, at root, a textilic art akin to basketry was as strange to Semper's readers, in the mid-nineteenth century, as it is to most of us today. Leading figures in the histories of art and architecture lined up to ridicule it. But it has recently found favour again in the late-twentieth-century writings of the Czech-born philosopher of design Vilém Flusser. In a characteristically idiosyncratic essay on the subject of 'shelters, screens and tents', Flusser distinguishes two kinds



Top stone on kitchen table, September 2022 – August 2023

of wall: the solid wall, hewn from rock or built from stone, and the screen wall, generally of a woven fabric.⁴ Though he never refers to Semper, this distinction is clearly of the same order as Semper's between *Mauer* and *Wand*. Flusser's screen wall is a membrane that covers a frame, exemplified by the wall of the tent. For Flusser, the tent is the direct descendant of the nest in the tree. And the weave of its cloth speaks to the experience of its inhabitants. It is precisely this capacity of a woven fabric to assemble, store and disseminate experience, he tells us, that is summed up in the word screen.

Curiously, Flusser goes on to posit a direct line of continuity from the screen wall of old, through oil-painted canvases and the surfaces of cinematographic projection, to the television and computer screens of today. These latter, he thinks, assemble and store experience just as the former.⁵ But this is precisely what they do not do. Rather, like the window or the mirror from which they are more plausibly descended, and unlike woven cloth or wicker-work, these electronic screens absorb nothing of what befalls them, either letting it pass through or reflecting it in its totality. There are two opposed principles at work here. According to one, already encountered in our comparison of art and trade painting, all variation plays upon a perfectly homogeneous ground without ever making contact with it. But with the other, variation is integral to the weave and texture of the ground itself. This was Semper's view, and it was what put him at odds with the art historical establishment of his time.⁶ Though Semper does not list painting among the trades of architecture, had he done so, he would doubtless have associated it, alongside tapestry weaving, with the arts of the membrane, albeit working with traces rather than threads.

With this, the ground takes on a different meaning. It is no longer, as Gibson would have us believe, the fundamental base upon which all else rests, initially as bare and uncluttered as the floorboards of an empty house waiting to be furnished.⁷ It is rather a zone of interpenetration, suspended

betwixt earth and sky, permeated by the tracks, trails, roots and runners of the living. The Victorian critic and connoisseur John Ruskin, introducing the fifth and final volume of his *Modern Painters*, published in 1860, aptly described the ground, in this sense, as a 'veil of strange intermediate being', through which it ministers to its inhabitants in the textures of its meadows and forests, rocky outcrops, moor and heath.⁸ Perhaps this is what most truly distinguishes the landscapes of the open air from the interior spaces of conventional domestic architecture. Inside the house, furniture stands on flat floors, objects rest on tables and shelves, and framed pictures hang on smoothly painted walls. Venture out of doors, however, and all that changes, as you find yourself in a bottomless milieu in which everything is enmeshed and intertwined.

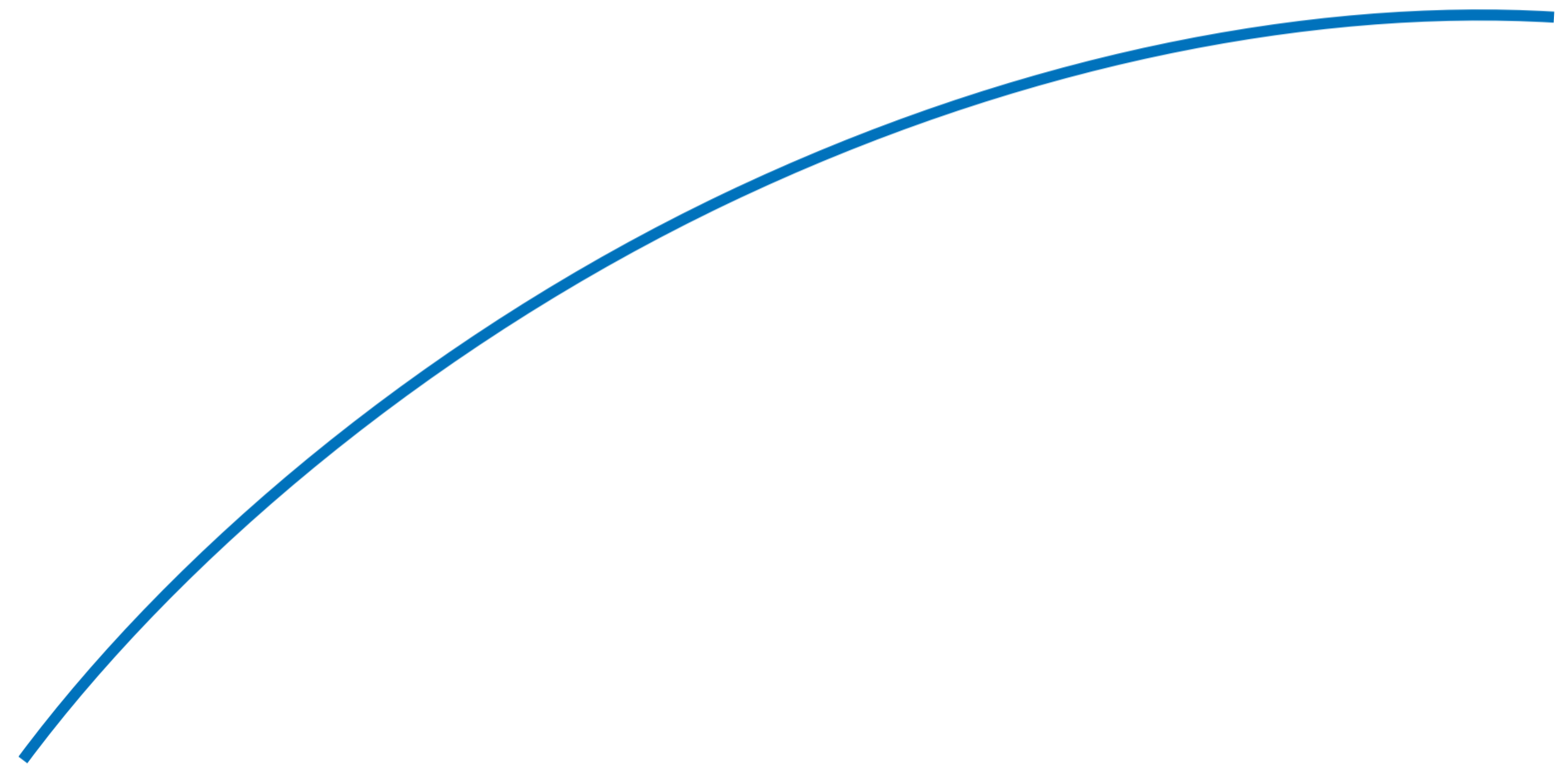
This brings us, finally, to the artistic experiments of Jo McGonigal. They are designed to test what happens if the principles that normally govern indoor and outside spaces are caused to collide. In place of a framed picture, a scrap of cloth hangs limply from an unpainted wall. Elsewhere the wall is punctured by an irregular hole that lets the light in, and by rods that stick through to the other side. A ball of string unravels, spilling out of a window and onto the pavement below. Smoke fills the air. A rough lump of local gritstone encrusted with moss and algae, taken from a drystone wall, sits on a smoothly planed dining table. These are the sorts of incongruity that result when, instead of painting the landscape on canvas and hanging the framed picture on your already perfectly painted wall, you paint with the landscape itself, weaving your own experience, in your gestures and the traces they leave, into its texture. Yet is this not what we all do anyway, in our everyday lives? Life is neither a disappearing act nor the masterful yet solitary execution of a total composition, but continually improvises a passage through and around the things and beings it encounters, refusing to be bound by the rectilinear frames and volumes of artistic and architectural convention. Like the animals, from cats and dogs to spiders and flies, with whom we share our domestic environment, we do not spend our lives inside or outside, but are forever going indoors and out. We are not, after all, exhibits in our own homes, any more than we are spectators who have come to see the works on display. Nor are the floorboards a stage on which we play our parts. The home is a home, not a gallery or a theatre. Perhaps, when all is said and done, it is we – painters neither by trade nor by art, but by experience – who are the real artists of our lives.

1. James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986, page 283.
2. Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, translated by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
3. Semper, *ibid.*, pages 103-4.
4. Vilém Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, London: Reaktion, pages 56-7.
5. Flusser, *ibid.*, page 57.
6. Semper's principal antagonist in this debate was Alois Reigl. In his *Problems of Style*, dating from 1893, Reigl contended that the patterns which Semper had attributed to the weave of materials in fact originated in a basic human drive to decorate surfaces, which long antedated the advent of the textile arts. See Alois Reigl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, edited by David Castriota, translated by Evelyn Kain, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.
7. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, pages 16, 78, 307.
8. *The Works of John Ruskin (Library Edition)*. Volume 7, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London: George Allen, pages 14-15.

TIM INGOLD, CBE, FBA, FRSE

EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

SPECIAL THANKS TO ALICE MERIDA RICHARDS (MANCHESTER CERAMICS COLLECTIVE)
MATTHEW HOULDING @ STUDIO2, TODMORDEN AND JONATHAN STANSFIELD
ROCKEND MOOR QUARRY, TODMORDEN.



Blue chalk groove in gesso, 2023
Studio2, Todmorden.

Cover:
Gritstone, Rockend Moor, Todmorden.
53°43'54.8"N 2°03'23.7"W

Siliceous sandstone containing Calcite,
Clay Minerals, Quartz, Feldspar and Micas.