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‘MAKING FLIPPY FLOPPY’

PETER HALLEY’S POSTMODERNIST ABSTRACTION (1980–1987)

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PhD
ABSTRACT

Having completed studies at Yale and The University of New Orleans, in 1980 American artist Peter Halley returned to his hometown in New York City, took a studio in the East Village, and began to paint. Within six years he would become one of the most talked about artists in America. In this thesis I argue that Halley’s paintings of the 1980s constructed new relationships, or chains of meaning, between past abstract art—in particular, though not exclusively, forms of American minimalist abstract painting and sculpture from the 1950s and 1960s—and a range of social forms and urban textures particular to New York City. By suggesting new social interpretations of past abstract art, Halley’s model of ‘postmodernist abstraction’ prompts us to revise our understanding of the historicity and criticality of postmodernist painting. Pushing back against arguments about 1980s postmodernism as historical amnesia (Fredric Jameson), or market-complicit conventionalism (Hal Foster), I read Halley’s ‘Neo-geo’ as one example of how strategies such as pastiche and double-coding—identified by many critics as central tenets of the postmodernist art that emerged in New York in the 1980s—functioned as vehicles for historical orientation during a decade otherwise marked by disorientating economic, social, and cultural change.
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INTRODUCTION

Peter Halley: An Incomplete Project?

After interest in Neo-expressionist painting had peaked in the New York art world around 1984, a wave of abstract painting that was cool, conceptual, and full of theoretically charged references to earlier forms of geometric abstraction began doing the rounds in SoHo and the East Village. Writing in the June 1986 edition of *Art in America*, Hal Foster, then an up and coming editor at the magazine, was quick to outline a polemical response to the new abstraction. Identifying artists from earlier generations—such as Jack Goldstein and Sherrie Levine, as well as members of a younger cohort of East Village artists, such as Ashley Bickerton, Meyer Vaisman, and Peter Halley—Foster argued that the ‘simulation’ of abstraction by these artists was a conventionalist strategy designed to satiate a booming art market’s desire for familiar and reassuring styles of abstract painting.¹ Foster also claimed these new tendencies in abstract painting were complicit with the increasingly unreal and disorientating nature of everyday life in 1980s America. Far from offering any resistance to this problem—Foster no doubt had in mind the negativity of the kind of post-war formalist painting being quoted in this new work—the return to abstraction in 1980s painting was framed as the cultural symptom of a new, disruptive economic regime defined by deep-reaching commodification and innovative forms of new media and technology. In contrast to the

¹ Hal Foster, ‘Signs Taken as Wonders’, *Art in America*, June 1986, 90–91.
models of historical art it seemed to reprise, the new abstraction was, for Foster, in no obvious way liberative or emancipatory.\(^2\) Inasmuch as it appeared to strip its referent of ‘historical contexts and discursive connections’, this was painting that reinforced ‘the delirium of commodity signs’, and the ‘duplication of events by simulated images’.\(^3\)

The theoretical basis of this problematisation of the abstract painting appearing in the galleries of New York was the 1980s work of critic, philosopher, and Marxist political theorist, Fredric Jameson. Foster, like so many others at the time, was influenced by Jameson’s 1984 article ‘Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism’—a text that, in the words of Marxist historian Perry Anderson, ‘redrew the whole map of the postmodern in one stroke—a prodigious inaugural gesture that has commanded the field ever since’.\(^4\) In this article, first published in the July/August 1984 edition of The New Left Review (then revised and republished as the lead essay in a 1991 book of the same title), Jameson used Marxist economist Ernst Mandel’s term ‘late-capitalism’ as a historical framework to identify and diagnose a new set of cultural tendencies that had become prominent in the 1980s. Writing in 1972, Mandel had proposed three fundamental moments or periods in the development of a mature capitalism: a period of market capitalism determined by the growth of industrial capital in domestic markets, roughly from 1700 to 1870; a monopoly or imperialist stage characterised by competition for expanding international markets based upon the intensive exploitation of colonial territories, roughly from 1870 to the start of World War II; and, finally, the epoch of late capitalism, beginning after World War II, determined in its early stages by mass

\(^2\) Foster, ‘Signs Taken as Wonders’, 91.
\(^3\) Foster, ‘Signs Taken as Wonders’, 91.
production and consumption, and then later by the consolidation of multinational corporations and dynamic global markets reliant on increasingly liquid flows of capital, labour and advanced computer-based technologies.\(^5\) Absorbed into his own analysis, Jameson describes each of Mandel’s stages as ‘fundamental breaks or quantum leaps’ in the development of capitalism, while also observing that each stage has a concomitant cultural expression, or ‘cultural specificity’.\(^6\)

While the absorption of Mandel’s analysis into Jameson’s own historical and cultural framework raised some criticisms—historian and urban theorist Mike Davis, for example, observed certain inconsistencies between Mandel’s late-capitalist stage, with its roots going back to the 1940s, and Jameson’s conception of postmodernist cultural production, which only went back to the mid-1970s—as sociologist David Gartman notes, an adjusted chronology emerged in Jameson’s later work, resulting in a closer overall fit between the historical and cultural categories at hand.\(^7\) In my own analysis I follow the adjusted chronology of Jameson’s later work, which aligns the emergence of


\(^6\) As a framework for this ‘cultural specificity’, Jameson proposes we link market capitalism with the cultural logic of realist art; monopoly or imperialist capitalism with modernist art; and, finally, late capitalism with the kind of postmodernist art that is the focus of this dissertation. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 49.

\(^7\) Writing in *The New Left Review* the year after the publication of Jameson’s seminal essay, Davis questioned whether postmodernist works of art expressed the cultural logic of late-capitalism in any obvious or straightforward way, arguing that ‘there are intractable difficulties in establishing a first “fit” between postmodernism and Mandel’s concept of the late-capitalist stage’ (Mike Davis, ‘Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism’, *New Left Review* 151 (May/June 1985): 106–107). To explain, while Mandel’s concept of late capitalism is an attempt to understand a long wave of post-war economic growth that eventually terminated in the economic slump of the mid-1970s, Jameson’s cultural stage of postmodernism would appear to begin, at the very earliest, in the mid-to-late 1960s, only firmly taking root a decade later. So we have a discrepancy between a new capitalist stage stretching back to the mid-1940s, and a cultural stage becoming prominent only by the mid-1970s. However, as David Gartman notes, in Jameson’s later work this chronology is adjusted. Citing arguments made in *The Seeds of Time* (1994), Gartman points out that Jameson’s more recent statements on these issues employ the language of ‘post-Fordism’ to characterise the economic stage that corresponds with postmodernism. As Gartman continues, ‘this not only makes his chronology more synchronous, since the beginning of the post-Fordist economy is generally dated from the early 1970s, but it also makes Jameson’s work compatible with the growing body of work, including that of David Harvey (1989), Edward Soja (1989), Lawrence Grossberg (1992), and Stuart Hall (1989), that links postmodernist cultural production and post-Fordism. David Gartman, ‘Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Post-Fordism?’, *The Sociological Quarterly* 39, no.1 (1998): 120–121).
postmodernist cultural production, not with Mandel’s conception of late-capitalism, but with an understanding of late-capitalism that tracks the emergence of a post-Fordist mode of production during the 1970s.\(^8\)

In terms of the characteristics of late-capitalism, Jameson argues that our current stage ‘constitutes […] the purest form of capital yet to have emerged,’ a moment defined by the ‘prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas’—including, for the first time, cultural production.\(^9\) Whereas once culturally dominant forms of negative or oppositional modernist artistic production maintained semi-autonomy from the worst effects of capitalist commodification, reification, and fragmentation, Jameson suggests that, since the 1970s, a more fully integrated postmodernist culture has emerged. As Jameson writes in the introduction to the book of essays on postmodernist cultural production he published in 1991 as a follow up to his 1984 essay,

> What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural

\(^8\) I base my own periodisation here on this adjusted chronology for the simple reason that this thesis attempts to link the cultural logic of Halley’s postmodernist abstraction with capitalist development in a single geographic site: New York City. And with leading social, economic, and political historians of the recent history of New York City—individuals such as William K. Tabb (1982), Martin Shefter (1985), Eric Lichten (1986), Joshua B. Freeman (2000), Kim Phillips-Fein (2017), and Benjamin Boltzmann (2021)—all agreeing that a decisive transition away from a liberal, industrial or Fordist city took place in New York after the urban fiscal crisis of 1975, this decision appears to make good historical sense. Henceforth, when using the term ‘late-capitalism’, I am indicating the post-Fordist turn in the economic order of New York and America, rather than the post-war change in economic conditions signaled in Mandel’s original analysis.

function and position to aesthetic innovations and experimentation.  

Symptomatic of this economic integration, Jameson argues that postmodernist cultural productions tend towards what he variably labelled ‘historicism’, ‘nostalgia’, or ‘pastiche’. The late-1970s and 1980s thus marked a new historical moment in which market forces had infiltrated culture to such a degree that a sense of historical amnesia—a profound disorientation of present artists to historical contexts—had come to pass. Observing ‘the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past’ at work in postmodernist art, Jameson concluded that, with the collapse of notions of progress and telos central to modernist art, postmodernist artists were left stumbling about in a state of historical blindness and disorientation.

In both the 1984 and 1991 versions of his essay, Jameson focused on cinema as a prominent site of this postmodernist ‘crisis of historicity’. Citing films such as George Lucas’s American Graffiti (1973) and Francis-Ford Coppola’s Rumble Fish (1983)—both of which set out to recapture the ‘mesmerizing lost reality of the Eisenhower era’, a period that, ‘for Americans at least […] remains the privileged lost objects of desire’—Jameson introduces the idea that these ‘nostalgia films’ convey a sense of postmodernist historical disorientation or delirium through their heavily stylised ‘aesthetic colonization’ of the past.  

Jameson goes on to discuss revivals of 1930s American and Italian cinema in similar terms, pointing to Roman Polanski’s Chinatown (1974) and Bernardo Bertolucci’s Il Conformista (1970) as exemplifying the importance

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10 Jameson, Postmodernism, 4–5. Also titled Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism, this book included as its opening chapter an updated version of the same titled 1984 essay.

11 Jameson, Postmodernism, 19.
of ‘stylistic recuperation’ in nostalgia film. Indeed, Jameson makes clear that nostalgia film approaches the history of cinema largely through stylistic connotation alone, ‘conveying “pastness” by the glossy qualities of the image, and “1930s-ness” or “1950s-ness” by the attributes of fashion’.\textsuperscript{12} Underlining the crisis of historical orientation signalled by these stylised, superficial cinematic renderings of the past, Jameson concludes that ‘faced with these ultimate objects—our social, historical, and existential present, and the past as “referent”—the incompatibility of a postmodernist “nostalgia” art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent’.\textsuperscript{13}

While Jameson does briefly mention Neo-expressionist painting, or what he calls ‘the new expressionism’, in his 1984 essay, he does not elaborate upon the ways in which the postmodernist crisis of historicity manifested in painting at this time. And yet, as demonstrated by the retroactive logic of Neo-expressionism, with its stylised recuperation of expressionist tendencies in figurative painting from over half a century before, as well as the rise of the new abstraction, nostalgia also formed the dominant groundtone for contemporary art in New York during the 1980s. And this was a fact not lost on critics reviewing Halley’s work when it came to widespread prominence in the New York art world in 1986.

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In April of 1986, Halley opened his second and final solo exhibition at East Village space, \textit{International with Monument} (Figure 0.1). Almost immediately after this


\textsuperscript{13} Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism}, 19.
exhibition, together with fellow *International with Monument* stablemates Jeff Koons and Ashley Bickerton, and the gallery’s cofounder, Meyer Vaisman (who soon sold his share in the space to work full time as an artist), Halley joined *Sonnabend* in SoHo—by any measure a larger, more established gallery. Dubbed the ‘Hot Four’ by *New York Magazine*, Halley, Koons, Vaisman, and Bickerton debuted at *Sonnabend* in a four-man show that opened in October 1986 and quickly sold out (Figure 0.2). Writing in *The New York Times* on October 26th, Roberta Smith spoke of the widely anticipated group exhibition as bringing the ‘bumptious, youthful aggressiveness’ of ‘the best and brightest young talent of the East Village art scene to prominent light’. For Smith, all four artists seemed to mark a return to a type of art ‘that is certifiably American and firmly rooted in the Pop-Minimal-Conceptual tradition’, continuing, ‘it clearly replaces Neo-expressionist excess with cool calculation’. Halley in particular conjured for Smith a sense of ‘60’s purities’, but ‘bigger scaled and brighter perhaps—but corrupted mainly by references to other earlier purities, to Barnett Newman’s zips, Kenneth Noland’s stripes, and Ellsworth Kelly’s monochromes’.14 *The New York Times* had already fuelled growing interest in Halley’s work by publishing a string of laudatory articles on ‘Neo-geo’—the tag that had been affixed to the work of four artists, amongst others, earlier that summer. ‘Who’s new? began John Russell in his *Art View* column of 18 May 1986. His answer? ‘Peter Halley’—who ‘deals with a plain-spoken, frontal, uninflected idiom that has elements […] of the abstract painting of a generation ago’.15

By no means did all critics look upon Halley’s seemingly nostalgic abstractions with the interest of Smith and Russell, however. Kay Larson, for one, could not see

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beyond the role the rapidly expanding, and increasingly bullish, market was playing in
the prominence of Halley and his cohort. Over the course of two columns published in
New York magazine in 1986, Larson launched a bitter attack on Halley and the Neo-geo
group. In her first column, while restating the generally accepted logic of Halley’s work—
this was painting that ‘consciously simulated the flat, wallpaper-like look of 1960s
geometric painting, including Op Art, imitation California-style “hard edge,” and a kind of
photocopied parody of Barnett Newman or Kenneth Noland’—Larson identified that it
was not critics who were excitedly promoting this new work (critics, Larson proposed,
‘are generally hostile’ to Neo-geo) but ‘a few shrewd collectors with a financial stake in
its success’. Larson then coined a term for beneficiaries of this patronage, such as
Halley: ‘Neoists’. 17

As Larson went on to make clear, she considered the work of the Neoists to be a
cynical expression of the mid-1980s economic boom; this was a new form of empty or

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16 From the cloistered scene of the 1950s and 1960s, by the late 1970s growth in the New York art market began to accelerate. As data from The Art Dealers Association of America shows, in 1976 the New York Metropolitan area had around 200 commercial galleries in operation, most of which occupied SoHo or the traditional gallery district of 57th Street. By 1986, that same organisation estimated there to be 560 galleries in New York—a 180% increase in commercial activity in just a decade. During this time corporate collecting also increased. Consider the case of Citibank, who, between 1979 and 1988, employed dealer and curator Jeffery Deitch to manage their international art advisory service. As reported in a 1985 article in The New York Times entitled ‘New Art, New Money’, by the mid-1980s Citibank were advising corporate customers that ‘art of quality’ could be considered a good investment. And, along with other leading banks, they were happy to accept fine art, as well as period furniture, as collateral put down against major loans. See Cathleen McGuigan, New Art, New Money, ‘The New York Times’, 10 February 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/10/magazine/new-art-new-money.html. The East Village, where Halley lived, worked, and showed his art between 1980 and 1985, was a particular hot-spot. As critic Douglas McGill explained in 1986, ‘although there were virtually no art galleries there in 1980 [the year Halley moved into his East 7th St studio], there are nearly 100 there today […] In tiny storefronts previously occupied by Ukrainian and Polish-American shops dozens of new art galleries have been started each year by young entrepreneurs, many of them artists’. As McGill continues, ‘some days, the Lower East Side, which is called the East Village by many, looks like a cultural version of the garment district, with artists and art handlers carrying canvases still wet with paint from their apartment studios to galleries to display. The local cafes, which have proliferated along with the galleries, are filled with artists and dealers, and gallery owners frequently take groups of collectors to artists’ studios to try to interest them in works that are still in progress’. See Douglas McGill, ‘The Lower East Side’s New Artists’, The New York Times, 3 June 1986, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/03/arts/the-lower-east-side-s-new-artists.html. It was no wonder, then, that critic Thomas Crow, with a touch of irony, went as far as to describe the East Village art scene in 1986 as a bespoke creation designed for one purpose: to ‘accommodate the expansion of the art marketplace’. See Thomas Crow, ‘The Curious Case of Hank Herron’, in Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Painting and Sculpture (Boston: ICA, 1986), 18.

meaningless art delivered from the heart of an art world beholden to rapid fashion cycles and the wants, needs, and desires of a new collector class backed by thriving financial markets. As Larson wrote,

Since the search for “enduring value” has become meaningless—and, in an art world that turns over every six months, commercially pointless—these artists deliberately propose an art that is, in classical terms, valueless. For [...] Halley’s generation, the whole of twentieth century art is valueless—or, more precisely, of equal and therefore debased value [...] In other words, art becomes not a yearning of the spirit for transcendence but a quantifiable commercial transaction.18

As Larson concluded, ‘nothing about the Neoists is unique except their lust for money—the last chance to shock the bourgeoisie, by embracing it’, with this art, ‘cynical, consumerist art becomes the perfect mirror of its coked-up, sensation-seeking society. And a society that adores trash, snaps it all up’.19

As we have already seen, Larson’s widely read accusations of Neoist cynicism and commercialism were not the only major criticism along lines of market complicity launched against the art of Halley and his cohort in 1986. In a set of remarkably consistent positions published between April 1986 and January 1987 in art periodicals and exhibition catalogues by Hal Foster and Yves-Alain Bois, Halley’s paintings were condemned as expressions of a new, market-driven impulse that was rapidly overtaking—that is, capitalising—art in the 1980s.

19 Larson, ‘Masters of Hype’.
In his aforementioned essay, ‘Signs Taken as Wonders’, Foster initially offered a default market based interpretation of the new abstract painting. Bored with Neo-expressionism, which had dominated the New York art world since the early 1980s, the market had been drawn back to expressive figuration’s opposite pole: lean and minimalist forms of geometric abstraction. ‘Governed by generation, measured by decade’, Neo-geo art played ‘parasitically [and] parodistically, on [the] yin-yang history of modern art’. This ‘cyclical logic of style’, Foster claimed, allowed for ‘a modicum of the new without threat of real change or loss of order’. And while Foster speculated that ‘there may be some historical redemption in this recycling, some transvaluation of esthetic values’, he nonetheless concluded that the logic of Neo-geo abstraction followed the dynamic of the market/history system more than anything else’.

Foster did, however, explore some of the deeper historical, philosophical, and political problems provoked by Halley’s ‘simulation of abstraction’. Halley’s reprisal of late-modernist abstraction was positioned in proximity to, but also at one removed from, the type of ‘Pictures Generation’ appropriation art that had appeared in New York in the late 1970s. Halley’s work could be considered an extension of appropriation art inasmuch as ‘to appropriate modern abstraction, to question its originary or sublime aspirations’, appeared, ‘for some’, to be the next logical move after the Pictures Generation’s ‘sometimes critical, sometime collusive reframing of high-artistic and

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20 Foster, ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, 84.
21 The word ‘appropriation’ doesn’t actually appear in the essay Douglas Crimp wrote in the catalogue accompanying his exhibition ‘Pictures’, a group exhibition featuring the work of Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith, held at New York’s non-profit gallery Artists Space in 1977. Nor does it feature in the reworking of that essay that appeared in the Spring 1979 edition of October. On the subject of the appropriation of other images, Crimp’s 1977 catalogue text does, however, include the following useful statement on the approach of the artists included in his exhibition: ‘for their pictures, these artists have turned to the available images in the culture around them. But they subvert the standard signifying function of those pictures, tied to their captions, their commentaries, their narrative sequences—tied, that is, to the illusion that they are directly transparent to a signified’. See Douglas Crimp, ‘Pictures’, Artists Space, 1977, https://texts.artistsspace.org/6wdfi1kg accessed 14/01/22
mass-cultural representations’. Yet, as Foster noted, Halley’s paintings worked in a different way to appropriation. While much appropriation art was engaged in copying—from Sherrie Levine’s serial photographic reproductions of Walker Evans’ depression era images, to Richard Prince’s ‘rephotographs’ of highly idealised advertising campaigns (Figures 0.3 and 0.4)—Halley did not copy his referent so much as he simulated it. Whereas a copy attempts to reproduce or replicate a faithful version of some original, in doing so destabilising notions of originality and authorship attached to that original work, a simulacral image does not copy its referent so much as evoke its essential or general characteristics. In this sense, as Foster rightly observed, Halley’s abstractions conjured up the general sensibility or atmosphere of, say, Stella, Noland, or Judd’s work, but without directly copying the work of these artists in any obvious or direct way.

Foster did see some scope for criticality in this sort of procedure—simulation painting might ‘potentially [be] in a position to disrupt [painting’s] institutional canon and confuse its historical logic’. And yet, in Foster’s mind, Halley’s painting was not invested enough in the historical and critical context of the genre of post-war geometric abstraction he was simulating to achieve this critical effect. Rather, Halley appeared to settle for a simple historical gambit: ironising the claims of late-modernist art—to autonomy, or literalism, progress, and presence; all key notions in the formalist discursive framework surrounding the works he was simulating—so as to demonstrate, perhaps even celebrate, the semantic and historical delirium of the postmodernist moment in New York cultural production in which these, and many other ‘grand-

22 Foster, ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, 83.
23 Foster, ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, 83.
narratives’ had broken apart. As such, Foster concluded that, like most of the other simulation painting projects doing the rounds in SoHo and the East Village in 1986, Halley’s work was no more than:

A readymade reduction of serious abstraction, a campy recycling of outré abstraction that ‘evinced a posthistorical attitude whereby art, stripped […] of its material context and discursive entanglements, appears as a synchronous array of so many styles devices or signs to collect, pastiche or otherwise manipulate—with no one deemed more necessary, pertinent or advanced than the next.

Halley had failed to deconstruct painting’s historical contexts and material practices (Foster mentions late-modernists such as Robert Ryman or Brice Marden—Figures 0.5 and 0.6—as examples of more effective deconstructions of the idiom of high-modernist painting) or to act as any sort of effective recovery of history through memory. His simulation of abstraction simply emptied the ‘serious abstraction’ of 1960s modernist painting from New York, reducing historically established material practices of key modernist artists to a set of banal conventions which he then repeated, over and again—and to great market success.

24 In his 1979 book The Postmodern Condition, philosopher Jean-François Lyotard proposed that we reject what he described as the ‘grand narratives’ of Western culture. As Perry Anderson writes in The Origins of Postmodernity (1998), the central target of Lyotard’s proposal was ‘of course, classical socialism’. However, as Anderson notes, in later texts Lyotard would extend the list of defunct grand narratives to include ‘Christian redemption, Enlightenment progress, Hegelian spirit, Romantic unity, Nazi racism, Keynesian equilibrium’. See Perry Anderson, The Origins of Postmodernity (London: Verso, 1998), 31, and Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

25 Foster, ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, 86.
This ‘posthistorical perspectivalism’, as Foster described it, set a dangerous precedent for art, one that had its roots in Halley’s interest in Jean Baudrillard’s late 1970s and early 1980s writing. Halley’s invocation of Baudrillard in his written work of 1983 and 1984, his citation of Baudrillard in his 1985 interview with Jeanne Siegel for Arts magazine, and his 1986 interview with Michele Cone for Flash Art, were seized upon by Foster. As he argued, while the use of simulation in painting may ‘transgress traditional forms of art’, this approach was ‘hardly disruptive or critical of simulation as a mode’; that is, simulation as a deep-reaching condition of social reality in the 1980s. And while simulation—as a social phenomenon—‘may undercut representation or free us from its referential myths,’ Foster argued that, ‘together with the old regime of disciplinary surveillance [simulation nonetheless] constitutes a principal means of deterrence in our society’.

Foster’s premise, that Halley was somehow complicit with, rather than critical of, the simulacral logic of the 1980s, was taken up and echoed by Yves-Alain Bois in his essay, ‘Painting: The Task of Mourning’ (1986). As Bois argued:

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26 In works such as Symbolic Exchange and Death (1977) and Simulacra and Simulations (1981), Baudrillard had traced the gradual corruption of a stable sense of reality at work in the Western society under conditions of advanced capitalism. Baudrillard reached anglophone audiences for the first time when, in 1983, New York-based publisher and theorist Sylvere Lotringer published Baudrillard’s Simulations—the first title in Semiotext(e)’s Foreign Agents series: an imprint focused on translating works from the major theorists of French post-structuralism. Part one of Simulations was a section from Simulacra and Simulations entitled ‘The Procession of Simulacra’, and part two was taken from Symbolic Exchange and Death. See Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).


28 Foster, ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, 91.
The work of this recent group of painters wishes to respond to our simulacral era, yet paradoxically in their very reliance upon Jean Baudrillard, emphasized by Peter Halley who frequently writes critically about these issues, they all admit the end has come [for abstract painting], that the end is over (hence we can start again […]; that we can paint without the feeling of the end, only its simulacrum) […] Baudrillard was driven, by the very nature of his millenarianist feeling, to a fascination for the age of simulacrum, a glorification of our own impotence disguised as nihilism. It seems to me that although the young artists in question address the issue of the simulacral—of the abstract simulation produced by capital—they have similarly abandoned themselves to the seduction of what they claim to denounce […] Like Baudrillard, I would call them manic mourners. Their return to painting, as though the age of the simulacral could be represented, comes from the feeling that since the end has come, since it’s all over, we can rejoice at the killing of the dead.29

Framing Baudrillardian simulation as a theory of the ‘death’ of the real, Bois positions this death as an apocalyptic notion that found its postmodernist cultural analogue in the discourse around ‘the death of painting, and, more specifically, the death of abstract painting’.30 For Bois, the new abstraction emerging from the East Village celebrated this death, positioning itself as a ‘manic’ postmodernist expression of mourning for the loss of abstract painting.

In addition to criticising the way in which tropes of past art were being reprised in Halley’s Neo-geo paintings, Both Foster and Bois’s polemics also singled out Halley’s

attempt to represent ‘late-capitalist social space’ in his paintings. For Foster the
question was: how could the vast networks of the global system of the late-capitalist
economy—‘our new dynamic of electronic information and mass media’, as Foster
described it—be represented in works of minimalist abstraction? While recognising
that Halley’s work raised ‘the question of the “representability” of late-capitalism as a
whole, a system apparently global in its reach, everywhere and nowhere at once,’
Foster concluded that in his attempt to engage this system and its processes, Halley
reduced the complexity of late-capitalist social space down to ‘a total system of
cybernetic networks’ so simplistic it rendered its subject matter ‘innocuous’. Equally,
for Bois, Halley’s ‘pictorial rhetoric of “cells” and “conduits”’ advanced the somewhat
deluded idea that the abstraction of late-capitalism could somehow be critically captured
and expressed through ‘iconological rendering’ alone.

It’s important to be clear that the reception of Halley’s work during the 1980s was
not uniformly critical. While the general consensus regarding Halley’s work around 1986
leaned towards opprobrium, his work was championed by a number of key critics and
collaborators during the 1980s. However significant the readings put forward by these
figures were, the historical image of Halley’s paintings of the 1980s remains skewed
towards the negative reception of his work put forward by critics such as Foster and

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31 Foster, ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, 87.
32 Foster, ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, 88.
34 These include the curatorial duo Collins and Milazzo, who wrote about Halley frequently and included him in many
of their exhibitions in the 1980s and 1990s. Already mentioned, Roberta Smith has been another long-standing
supporter of Halley’s work. Also of note are: Jeanne Siegel, who included an extensive interview with Halley in a
piece about artists writing criticism in the September 1985 edition of Arts magazine; Dan Cameron, who both wrote
about and exhibited Halley’s work; and editor of Flash Art, Giancarlo Politi, who both regularly commissioned writers
to engage Halley’s work, while also publishing an extensive interview with the artist in the Jan–Feb 1990 edition of
the magazine.
Bois. According to this viewpoint, Halley’s paintings were over-hyped symptoms of an art world beholden to ever-increasingly accelerating fashion cycles. More complexly, the aesthetic of Halley’s work—abstract, geometric, lean and minimal—framed by some as a necessary tonic following half a decade of lively, expressionistic figurative painting in New York—was viewed in terms of a banal pendulum swing of an art-market. By these critics, Halley’s return to abstraction was greeted with accusations that he was emptying out the tradition referenced in his paintings. Lacking engagement with either the material contexts or discursive problems of 1960s modernist art, Halley’s work could only offer up a vacant image of abstract painting, an insubstantial, thin, and superficial reflection of a once mighty intellectual tradition. Further, by invoking the Baudrillardian notion that late-capitalist life had been abstracted, or simulated, to such a degree that any previously stable sense of social reality had become dangerously compromised, Halley’s work was seen to play into, rather than challenge, the semantic delirium of life in mid-1980s America. And, finally, as representations of this new, simulated social reality, Halley’s paintings were seen as resolute failures: after all, how could the abstractive tendencies of late-capitalist life be represented in reductive, ‘quotational’, geometric paintings? The idea was almost absurd to Foster and Bois.

Cynical, over-hyped commercial art? The banal expression of predictable market currents? The emptying out of a rich and important critical tradition? A contribution to, rather than criticism of, the abstractive tendencies of late capitalist life? A flawed attempt to represent the unrepresentable? In her 2003 book Unpackaging the Art of the 1980s, Alison Pearlman argues that these dominant characterisations of Halley’s art
'have not yet been collectively and substantially challenged'.  While proposing that critics such as Buchloh and Foster ‘were really onto something when they repeatedly remarked on the pronounced tendency of 1980s artists to assemble their works with quotations or allusions to past art’, Pearlman asserts that these same critics ‘fell short in their descriptions and interpretations of [this] most significant phenomena’. This omission, Pearlman concludes, has resulted in this particular episode in recent American art history being left in a ‘state of suspended cartoon animation’. 

The intervening decades have seen little change in this situation. Foster, for one, would clarify and extend the arguments made in Signs Taken as Wonders when, a decade later, he wrote of Halley’s painting as an ‘art of cynical reason’ in his Return of the Real (1996). And by the early 2000s, propelled by the pre-eminence of French poststructuralist theory in the academy and art world alike, Foster’s original critique of the representational logic of Halley’s work was reconfigured and disseminated by a number of other writers. While Foster questioned how the systems and processes of late capitalist social space could be represented in works of minimalist abstraction, in a 2001 essay titled ‘Doing Theory’, theorist and publisher Sylvere Lotringer describes Halley’s paintings as flawed attempts to represent, not a world rendered abstract by simulation, but Baudrillard’s theoretical formulation of simulation itself. Focusing, once

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36 Pearlman, Unpacking Art of the 1980s, 29.
37 Pearlman, Unpacking Art of the 1980s, 29. One way to understand this state of ‘suspended animation’ is as an instance of a wider process in which the historiography of post-war American art tracks the shift from modernism to contemporary art, in doing so bypassing the questions and problems raised by postmodernist art altogether. As art historians Oliver O’Donnell and Chloe Julius have recently proposed, while American art history may have moved swiftly from the modern to the contemporary, ‘this was not the experience of artists and critics who lived through the transition’. As they explain, ‘for those intent on squeezing out modernism’s last drops, as well as for those washing their hands of it, “postmodern” was a far more apposite word to describe the paradigm shift’. See Oliver O’Donnell and Chloe Julius, ‘How New York Lost the Idea of (Post)Modern Art’, Association of Art History 2022 Annual Conference Session, (March 2022), https://eu.eventscloud.com/website/5317/sessions-by-day/how-new-york-lost-the-idea-of-post-modern-art/, accessed 05/05/22.
again, on Halley’s citation of Baudrillard in his mid-1980s essays and interviews, Lotringer argues that ‘the power of simulation,’ in Baudrillard’s theory, ‘wasn’t something that could ever be represented,’ adding that ‘it was more of a cerebral event, the dizzying realization of the deconstruction of any referentiality’. Accordingly, Halley’s attempt to represent this theory is dismissed by Lotringer as ‘[jumping] on the master’s bandwagon,’ in order to ‘bask in his phenomenal fame’ and superficially participate in the power of his ideas.

In many ways Lotringer’s analysis repeats the same issues that Pearlman argues undermine critiques of Halley’s work put forward by Foster and Buchloh. Foster, Buchloh and Lotringer all fixate on Halley’s citation of Baudrillard in his writing and interviews between 1984 and 1986. However, in doing so, they put aside almost all other aspects of the work—including the paintings themselves—which are subjected to almost no visual scrutiny. More recent accounts of Halley’s paintings of the 1980s continue to take up the line of attacked honed by Foster, Buchloh and, later, Lotringer by arguing that these works are flawed theoretical illustrations of Baudrillard’s concept of simulation. Consider, for example, historian François Cusset interpretation of the ‘misunderstanding’ of Baudrillard’s work by Halley and his Neo-geo cohort; media

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38 Sylvere Lotringer, ‘Doing Theory’, in French Theory in America, eds. Sylvere Lotringer and Sande Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2001), 149. The basis of Lotringer’s analysis here is a now famous encounter that took place in 1987, when Baudrillard was invited by Whitney Museum of American art to deliver a ‘Distinguished Lecture on American Art and Culture of the Twentieth Century’. As Lotringer explains: ‘the Whitney lecture having been booked months in advance, I arranged for another lecture “uptown” at Columbia University. “Downtown” artists showed up by the hundreds. They were eager to ask Baudrillard what he thought of “simulationist art” and of “the Baudrillard School,” Peter Halley's Neo-geo group of artists, Jeff Koons, Ross Bleckner, and Sherrie Levine, who claimed to be his disciples. Pressed to pronounce himself on this crucial matter, Baudrillard flatly replied that “there can’t be a simulationist school because the simulacrum cannot be represented.” It was, he added, a complete misunderstanding of his work. The public rejection of his “school” by the French master instantly made the headlines of art magazines throughout the country’. See Sylvere Lotringer, ‘Doing Theory’, in French Theory in America, eds. Sylvere Lotringer and Sande Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2001), 149–150.


In this thesis I largely put these sources, and the whole “simulationism controversy”, to the side. Instead, I return to less prominent parts of the archive around Halley’s 1980s work. I prioritise Halley’s interviews from the 1980s, and since then; I engage Halley’s essays in a way that incorporates his statements on Baudrillard, while not limiting my analysis to these statements; and I explore how Halley was received in magazine articles and reviews from the 1980s that did not get drawn into the issue around Baudrillard’s work. Most importantly, I attempt a deep engagement with Halley’s paintings themselves. Taken together, I hope these decisions result in the conversation about the work evolving from an issue regarding the correct interpretation and use of theory, to an examination of the deep and resonant historical complexities of Halley’s paintings.

By reading the trace or presence of past art in Halley’s canvases in a sustained, attentive way, I attempt to show how Halley’s abstract, oversized, hard-edged paintings, with their geometric blocks and dynamic lines, electrified colour and innovative adaptations of material and support, establish a rich, layered, and radically expanded engagement with a specific period in postwar American abstract painting. As I demonstrate, Halley’s postmodernist approach to abstraction establishes a complex and rich correspondence with the minimising and clarifying procedures that took place in
American art in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At this time, artists such Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland, and Ellsworth Kelly (though he had begun earlier) exchanged the loose, gestural, and expressive brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionism for a cooler, more impersonal approach to facture comprising clearly delineated zones of solid, flat colouration that emphasised clarity, sharpness, and finish, as well as the overall flatness of pictorial space. It is this tradition or approach, which ultimately culminated in the ‘specific objects’ of Minimalism, that is explicitly quoted Halley’s postmodernist abstractions.

While clearly a practice grounded in historical quotation, a core undertaking of this thesis is to test the idea that the anachronism of Halley’s work resulted in paintings with a random or superficial orientation towards history. While Halley did draw together fragmented ‘traits’ from past abstract art in his work, I want to explore to what extent a coherent postmodernist artistic strategy resulted from this procedure. Central to this exploration is the representational aspect of Halley’s work. For Halley does not simply copy these historical forms of abstraction. Rather, his paintings are the product of a systematic, conceptually coherent, postmodernist artistic procedure in which the ‘pure forms’ of past examples of minimalist abstraction are ‘double coded’ so as to both symbolically and materially allude to different kinds of social forms. Repudiating

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42 The notion of double-coding has its roots in a particular conception of “post-modern” architecture put forward by architectural historian and critic Charles Jencks in his late-1970s writing. Throughout his book The Language of Post-Modern Architecture (1977), Jencks makes use of a conception of “coding” to indicate that architecture is an art form that communicates or sends messages to the viewer through its form or style. His concept of double-coding suggests the way in which post-modern architecture supplements the “language” or “messages” of existing architectural forms—most prominently that of modernist architecture—with other messages, resulting in architectural forms that communicate different meanings to their viewer simultaneously. A standard example here is Philip Johnson’s AT&T building (1984), a structure that combines the style or form of a classic modernist skyscraper with an open-top pediment harking back to the ornamented architecture of antiquity. See Charles Jenks, The Language of Post-Modernism (New York: Rizzoli, 1977). Literary theorist and critic Linda Hutcheon gives the concept of double-coding
Greenberg’s dominant stylistic or formalistic conception of the purity or autonomy of abstract art—the distinction of painting from the real world—Halley advances the oddly compelling idea that aspects of the genre or tradition of post-war minimalist geometric painting can be used to articulate or figure some kind of image or representation of social reality.

As Pearlman observes of this interpretation, first advanced by Halley in essays from the 1980s, as well as a number of interviews conducted for art periodicals and independent journals and magazines between 1985 and 1987:

The most consistent feature of Halley’s writing about his own work is his assertion that abstraction, particularly the geometric abstraction he practices, necessarily evokes some aspect of the real world [...] He opposes this materially involved idea of abstraction to that of formalism, in which abstraction is considered a means of forsaking or transcending the material world.43

In the paintings I explore in this thesis, some of the basic tropes of American minimalist geometric abstraction of the 1950s and 1960s—austere, symmetrical geometry; recursive emblematic icons; planarity; the use of support in an architectonic manner; complex, textured surfaces; vivid monochromatic zones of solid colour; industrial achromatics and materials—are reinvented or recoded in ways that establish new chains of meaning between these generic characteristics of past artworks and Halley’s

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43 Pearlman, *Unpacking Art of the 1980s*, 125
experiences of the real world he occupied in the 1980s. In this sense, we can offer a simple portmanteau definition of the theoretical basis of Halley’s abstraction—this is, literally, “post-modernist” abstraction: abstraction that moves beyond the theoretical self-referential autonomy of much post-war American abstraction, while, crucially, remaining within the formal paradigm of post-painterly, colorfield, hard-edge, and minimalist abstraction—work otherwise defined in terms of the kind self-enclosed autonomy outlined in Greenberg’s theory of modernist painting.44

It’s worth briefly unpacking the title of this thesis at this point, as it playfully alludes to the double-coded or recoded logic of Halley’s paintings of the 1980s. On one level, my title draws from the equivocality inherent in the idea of something that ‘flip-flops’ between different states or conditions. ‘Flip-flop’ is term used in electronics to describe a kind of circuit that has two stable states that can be switched between via an input signal. It is also the name for a sandal-like open shoe that makes a particular ‘flip-flop’ noise as it sole moves between the ground and the wearers raised foot as they walk. In informal American parlance, to ‘flip-flop’ also means to change position on something. In each of these instances, to ‘flip-flop’ describes a shifting or moving

44 As critical geographer David Harvey noted in 1989, while postmodernist arguments had actively defined and shaped standards of social, political, and cultural critique since the late-1970s, postmodernism itself turned out to be a ‘minefield of conflicting notions’. However, drawing from a useful definition put forward by philosopher Peter Osborne in the same year Harvey’s book was published, we can say that the focus of Halley’s postmodernism is a specific form of modernism, what he describes as ‘a stylistic, formalistic, or what might be called an “art-historical” conception of modernism, derived in the most part, within the visual arts, from the work of Clement Greenberg’. As Osborne explains, ‘it is primarily in opposition to Greenberg’s conception of modernism that the idea of postmodernism has evolved in the visual arts’. It is this model of postmodernism—a model that opposes what Osborne describes as ‘the self-referential autonomy of Greenberg’s aesthetics […] his insistence on the traditional specificity of the aesthetic object, his imperative to the artist to develop the work out of the immanent formal properties of the medium, and the consequent self-enclosed, self-referential autonomy of the “high” modernist work itself—that is central to Halley’s postmodernist abstraction. See David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), iii; Peter Osborne, ‘Aesthetic Autonomy and the Crisis of Theory: Greenberg, Adorno, And the Problem of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts’, New Formations 9 (Winter 1989): 32.
between two different positions. The term ‘Making Flippy Floppy’ is, itself, taken from the title of a 1983 song by American new wave group, Talking Heads (a band with whom Halley and his work are closely connected, both culturally and geographically, as I will show later). While no clear or immediately obvious explanation of the song’s title can be found in its lyrics (a twitchy, angular word collage tinted with the anxiety and confusion of the early years of Reaganism: ‘our President is crazy / did you hear what he said’), one way of grasping the idea of ‘Making Flippy Floppy’ is as a specific expression of a new historical moment, a point in time in which in which previously solid polarities (whether political, artistic, or other) have begun to melt away, and new, dislocated and unstable approaches to producing or ‘making’ artistic meaning have emerged. What I want to suggest is that this particular image of thought is useful when trying to understand or grasp the historically specific, thoroughly dialectical way the meaning of past abstract art is restructured in Halley’s paintings.

In the context of debates concerning the post-Greenbergian direction of abstract painting, this kind of ‘flippy floppy’ or double-coded approach was one way in which a generation of artists emerging in 1980s New York sought to advance the project of abstraction amidst the ruins of its modernist legacy. Halley’s paintings of the 1980s can, in this sense, be understood as an opportunist reaction to the predicament of abstract painting in the early 1980s—its seeming obsolescence or availability at this particular historical juncture. Critic and historian Irving Sandler, who has described Halley’s work variably as ‘conceptual abstraction’ or ‘self-conscious abstraction,’ presents, in a chapter on ‘Commodity art, Neogeo, and the East Village Art Scene’ in his Art of the Postmodern Era, a lengthy quotation by critic Stephen Ellis on the ‘formal rhetoric’ of the
kind of postmodernist art that emerged in New York in the early 1980s that is worth repeating in full. For Ellis, the idioms of past art have become equally and simultaneously available. Such availability allows meaning to emerge from a grammar of connection and juxtaposition […] For the moderns the direction of march was clear: forward. For those working in the present, there is no single imperative direction, only a web of connections […] The ambition to create absolutely new form, in the modernist sense, has come to seem superfluous […] As a result, the nature of innovation has mutated to the invention of new relationships between forms […] fragments of previously existing units (historical idioms originally conceived as complete in themselves). Whether historical references are directly quoted […] or only alluded to […] the reliance on chains of fragmentary reference is the same. Of course the meaning of these chains, the reconstitutions of history they imply, may differ violently from artist to artist, but these common tropes indicate a shared sense of the plight and possibility of contemporary art [for the] generation of artists between 35 and 45.45

What Ellis is suggesting here—the idea of a generation of artists working laterally, without a sense of overwhelming, modernist teleology ‘forwards’, to build an artistic language which nevertheless connects to and renders legible the socio-economic conditions of their particular moment—is what I develop further in this thesis.

As I show, Halley transforms the obdurate squares, dynamic lines, and a range of other effects drawn from minimalist geometric art of the 1950s and 1960s, into representations of a range of social forms: types of architecture, for example, or new technologies. The ultimate point of this procedure, I argue, is to use the language of past abstraction to demystify these social forms so as to reveal the ways in which they have been shaped and determined by the logic of capitalist accumulation. Putting aside, for now, the question of why Halley represents social forms through the language of past art, we can say that the conceptual work of this thesis operates frequently within a dialectic between, on the one hand, abstract geometric artistic forms that have previously been conceived as being hostile to representation, and, on the other, different kinds of social forms. What Halley’s art aspires to do, in this interpretation at least, is to reveal how the social logic of capitalist economic and political processes, both past and present, generate, shape and determine different kinds of social forms, while remaining concealed or naturalised within them. But what does it mean to suggest that the social logic of capitalism is hidden or concealed within the social forms it generates? In order to grasp the challenge facing those—whether critical theorists or, for that matter, artists—who wish to expose or reveal the way capitalism mediates social forms, it is necessary to introduce a core Marxist concept here: commodity fetishism.

Commodity fetishism is a form of socially generated abstraction that comes to be a powerful force in capitalist economies. To explain, if we consider the multiplicity of production processes taking place in a capitalist society—from the buying and selling of labour power and the production and circulation of commodities, to the production of core educational, legalistic, cultural, and media institutions—as a kind of integrated
whole produced by human agents operating within a market society, then Marxists argue that a particular kind of distorted logic marks this “social totality”. As Marx repeatedly emphasises in his account of the capitalist commodity, exchange and money put forward in the first three chapters of the first volume of *Capital*—capitalism can be understood as a kind of self-mystifying social mechanism of abstraction with its roots in the fetish-like logic of exchange. The process of commodification central to exchange has what Marxists consider to be the deleterious effect of effacing the ‘use value’ of a given commodity—its sensuous particularity, concrete identity as an expression of human labour, and its ability to satisfy our wants and needs—transforming it instead into a universally quantifiable value form known as ‘exchange value’: a kind of ratio that allows the values of different commodities to be rendered equivalent, or market ready. However, in the transformation of a given commodity from a use value to an exchange value, the link within a given commodity to its concrete and material conditions of production is severed. In this way the socio economic conditions of production at work in a given commodity are obscured. As critical theorist, Thomas Keenan explains,

The radical heterogeneity of use values must be reduced, and that reduction or overcoming is to be accomplished only by an equally radical (“total”) abstraction that massively and systematically effaces the differentiation of every use value, everything. The difference of every use (property, thing) “must” be dissolved by the force of abstraction. And every exchange relation is characterized by (performs) this abstraction.  

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In this way, commodities simply become containers of exchange value. Everything real and concrete within them is emptied out, leaving only a homogenised husk-like appearance that allows them to be compared, and exchanged, with other commodities in a market society. As critical geographers Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw observe,

Severing materially and symbolically the connection between producing exchange and use values contributes to masking the qualitative social and environmental relations of production. Acquiring exchange value, without revealing at the same time the social power relations of their production, permits commodities to be presented as exceptional, as outside and over the thing that really makes them exceptional.48

As a result, as Kaika and Swyngedouw explain, a given commodity—whether a building, a computer, or even an artwork—will appear to us ‘as an autonomous entity, as having a life of its own and a value in itself.’49 However, this form of appearance—as a discreet or autonomous entity subject to its own, independent conventions, justifications and narratives of development—masks a commodity’s essential determination by concrete and material conditions generated by the social logic capitalism at a given historical moment.

Further, to the extent that Marxists ascribe a world constituting role to conditions of economic production, and inasmuch as these conditions of production are, as I have

49 Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw, ‘Fetishizing The Phantasmagoria of Urban Technological Networks,’ 123.
just outlined, determined by a kind of fetishism or abstraction, Marxists understand social reality as a whole to be fetish-like and abstract, full of illusory or mystified appearances. As such, the obscuring of real conditions of production in favour of foregrounding the fungible character of things becomes an incredibly potent social mechanism in market societies. As a result of commodity fetishism, material and concrete social conditions in a given market society are thoroughly blurred or obscured. As Marx states in Grundrisse: ‘individuals are now ruled by abstractions.’

One way of thinking about the analytic model proposed by Marxist theory is as an attempt to think through, apprehend and make clear the nature of the otherwise abstracted mediations taking place between commodities and capitalist production. As philosopher Tony Smith states:

The intelligibility of the concrete and material can only be grasped through asserting the priority of the thought process over how the concrete and material is given in appearances. The task of thought is […] to pierce though the appearances to that depth level.

As Smith suggests, it is only through thought and analysis that the fetish-like appearances of commodities, and the world they constitute, can be dissolved to reveal the essential concrete and material conditions at work deep within them.

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51 Tony Smith, The Logic of Marx’s Capital: Replies to Hegelian Criticisms,’ (Albany: State University of New York Press, 37.)
What I propose in this thesis is that Halley's paintings of the 1980s can be understood as a forms of thought or thinking that enact a range of complex, at times imbricated, dialectical procedures that draw from past art forms in order to create new works aimed at 'piercing though the appearances' of a whole range of social forms in order to reveal their mediation by the concrete and material conditions and contradictions of capitalist production. And while deciphering Halley's work will be a challenging task—above all due to the complex layers of mediation, and slippages between these layers, generated in his work—by reading Halley’s paintings of the 1980s in this way, I hope to cast them in a new, hopefully illuminating critical light: as abstract paintings with a particular kind of demystifying efficacy.

But, to be clear, the mediating force of the economy is not itself without complexity. Rather than upholding any kind of simple “reflective” understanding of the relationship between culture and the economy, in this thesis I draw from a more sophisticated model for the impact of the economy on culture that is influenced by Hegelian Marxists such as Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Fredric Jameson. As David Gartman observes,

This model holds that the main influence of the economy can be found not in the content of the culture but in its forms—not in what it says but how it says it. So they do not examine the content of culture for overt legitimations of the economic system and the ruling class. Instead, they examine the forms of expression, holding that these unconsciously reflect the problems of the economy. Every mode of production generates a set of social contradictions or dilemmas that form the experiences of all living
within it […] Cultural producers necessarily grapple with these social contradictions and experiences of their age, seeking to resolve them in artistic forms. In this way, the social contradictions engendered by the economy are unintentionally inscribed into the forms of cultural productions.  

While I explore a range of different contradictions that mark Halley’s paintings of the 1980s, one of the key interventions I make in this thesis concerns an attempt to expose Halley’s work as marked by a set of contradictions generated not by single mode of production, but, rather, between two contradictory modes of production in a single geographical location, New York City, at this particular moment in time.

Though Halley only briefly alludes directly to the connection between his painting and New York City at a few points in his interviews and texts, I make the case that Halley’s postmodernist abstractions are attempts to represent his experiences of New York as it underwent the later stages of a tumultuous transition from being a liberal, Fordist, industrial city, to a neoliberal, post-Fordist, post-industrial city. A brief synopsis of this transformation should, at this point, help make the tensions of this historical moment more clear.

General developments in the global economy led to radical changes in New York’s economic base that took effect from the late 1960s onwards. Significant capital flight led to widespread deindustrialisation in what was once a proud blue-collar city, as manufacturing workshops, warehouses, and storefronts across the five boroughs relocated to more favourable locations, areas lacking New York’s high wage and real-

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52 Gartman, ‘Postmodernism; or the Cultural Logic of Post-Fordism’, 121.
estate costs, and robust unions. This loss of working class industries and jobs took place in lockstep with so-called “white flight”, the departure of the city’s middle-class tax base to the suburbs and commuter towns, facilitated by what transpired to be racist policies, such as the G.I. bill, and racist practices, such as bank redlining. In turn, this decentralisation of New York’s workforce—and, indeed, the flight of industry—had been facilitated by the commencement of construction, from the late 1950s onwards at the behest of President Eisenhower, of the Interstate Highway System: a vast network of controlled access highways that plugged themselves into New York, only accelerating the move of industry and labour beyond city bounds. New York’s troubles at this time were only further compounded by solutions devised to resolve a debt problem that had been slowly building in the city since the 1960s. This problem came to a head in 1975 with what is known as the Urban Fiscal Crisis, a crisis that began when bankers refused to continue the purchase of debt-bonds from city lawmakers, and which nearly resulted in New York’s bankruptcy. A withering programme of austerity and cutbacks drawn up by an elite of government officials and financiers appointed to resolve the city’s debt problem had, by 1980, not only ravished New York’s once famous public sector, it had left the city in a state of material breakdown and decay. As theorists Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano observe, to speak of the city Halley returned to in 1980 is to describe a city more or less ‘abandoned by the lifeblood of capital’.

The breakdown and decay of industrial New York reached a climax in the recessions of 1980 and 1981 to 1982. However, by the middle of 1982, as President

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Regan settled into his first term in office, alliances between corporate and state interests put in place to resolve the Fiscal Crisis were well on their way to reconstructing New York as a neoliberal, post-Fordist city; and this was just as new forms of monetary capital liberated by a wide range of deregulations green-lit by the Reagan administration began to flood the city. If urban decay and breakdown had an imposing impact on New York’s urban subjects, the covert, if not invisible, quality of new forms of privatised capital restructuring the city, alongside a more general impulse towards new technologies and network systems, only redoubled this effect. These, and many other effects, added to the sense of the 1980s as a decade of profound, and indeed disorientating, social transformation in New York.

In the coming chapters I draw from a wide range of critical histories that have explored the implications of this transformation. One the one hand, with regard to the dramatic breakdown and collapse of liberal, Fordist, industrial New York, I reference sources such as Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Robert Caro’s *The Power Broker* (1974), and Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982). I also engage a body of work spanning the 1980s to the present time exploring New York’s urban fiscal crisis in 1975 and its aftermath that includes works by William K. Tabb (1982), Martin Shefter (1985), Eric Lichten (1986), Kim Phillips-Fein (2017), and Benjamin Holtzman (2021). In addition, I draw from social theory inflected readings of this period of history in New York from Joshua B. Freeman (2000) and Themis Chronopoulos (2011). Finally, I explore urban theories of Marxist critics such as Mike Davis, David Harvey, and David Gartman, as well as Jameson—who, as should already be clear, is a key figure throughout this
study, and in ways that stretch far beyond his postmodernist writings of the 1980s. On the other hand, I trace the rise of a new, technologised, late-capitalist or post-Fordist city through the work of theorists of new technologies and media such as Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard, Manuel Castells, Douglas Kellner, Jon Askonas, and Esther Leslie. I also explore the specifics of technological networks in the new-finance driven economy through works on finance and financial networks by Karin Knorr Cetina, Saskia Sassen, Giovanni Arrighi, Francisco Louçã and Michael Ash, Leigh Claire La Berge, and, once again, Jameson.

Overall, as I hope to demonstrate, reading these paintings *qua* the complex conjuncture of social forces at work during the 1980s in New York is one way to extend and amplify the historical meaning suggested for them by Halley in his own statements about the work. What I offer in this thesis, then, is an interpretation of Halley’s paintings that expands his own statements regarding their social logic towards an analysis of the particular dilemmas, qualities, and textures of a city in transformation. By attending to Halley’s paintings of the 1980s we can begin to understand the different ways in which the churn and chop of an urban environment moving, in the space of twenty or so years, from steady accumulation, to crisis and austerity, back to accumulation (though under radically changed economic terms) exerted a determinate impact on Halley as he, like so many other New Yorkers, attempted to gain a foothold in a city being aggressively reshaped by gale-like forces of social, economic, and political change.

While I spend much time in Chapters Two and Three mapping these changes through close readings of the development of the iconography, supporting structure, and use of colour and material in Halley’s painting, the impact of this transitional
moment in New York’s history can be framed by a single idea: as a result of the crisis and subsequent economic transformation of New York, by the early 1980s the city had become an increasingly disorientating kind of environment to be living in, a space increasingly resistant to, or defiant of, its subjects’ attempts to locate or position themselves within it. What I want to propose, then, is that Halley’s paintings of the 1980s can be understood as attempts to somehow resist the disorientation of this historical moment by attempting to see or make visible capitalism as it undertook its chaotic and disruptive shift from one mode of production to another. However insufficiently or incompletely, the paintings I explore in this thesis are read as attempts to visualise aspects of this historical shift in a set of images capable, even if only in some small way, of resisting the confusion of this period of remarkable social upheaval in New York. In this sense, I position Halley as an artist attempting to somehow dissolve the abstraction of capitalism at this historical moment, to see through the fetish-like appearances at work in the contradictory historical impulses at play in New York in the early 1980s.

Returning to my earlier discussion of commodity fetishism, one way of recasting the problem of capitalism’s abstraction is in aesthetic terms—as a problem of visibility or perception. To explain, understood as *abstrahere* (latin: to drag away from, remove forcibly, abort, divert), the philosophical concept of abstraction at work in the Marxist conception of capitalist production presupposes the negation or cancellation of the aesthetic, understood as *aisthēsis* (latin: perception or sensation). Abstraction and aesthetic therefore designate opposite activities: what can and cannot be sensed or perceived, respectively. As I have already emphasised, as a self-mystifying social
mechanism of abstraction grounded in the fetish-like logic of exchange, the ‘reality’ or essence of capitalist life is, by its own internal logic, something that cannot be sensed or perceived directly, but which takes the form of illusory or perverted appearances. In this way capitalist reality exhibits what philosopher Sami Khatib describes as ‘sensuous supra-sensuous’ qualities; what others, most notably Marxist economist and philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel, call ‘real abstraction’. As such, capitalist reality poses significant problems for aesthetic experience, and therefore, by default, for artistic representation.56

It is in the context of this dilemma or problem regarding the visibility or perceivability of capitalism that I engage Halley’s work. Holding a Marxist theoretical conception of the way capitalism resists our ability to grasp in mind its determinate presence in social reality, this thesis puts forward and tests the hypothesis that, by quoting and subverting the artistic language of past forms of abstract minimalist geometric art from post-war America, Halley’s postmodernist abstractions reconfigure or construct a representation of the everyday social forms of early-1980s New York—types of architectural form, for example, or the form of new technologies—in such a way that we, as viewers of these paintings, are afforded, if just fleetingly, a glimpse at what lies beyond the appearance of these forms: the essential concrete and material conditions otherwise concealed or naturalised within them. Halley’s somewhat strange approach to abstraction—his establishment of past art as a mediator between his production of new artistic forms and his experience of New York City at this time—is, therefore, a

postmodernist method with the capacity to help us see the social forces and power relations at work in capitalism at this particular historical juncture.

While the postmodernist torsions and refractions of Halley’s explicitly quotational model of abstraction operate quite differently from, say, the forms of Surrealist collage that Walter Benjamin had in mind when citing the limitations inherent in realist attempts to depict capitalism, it is worth restating Benjamin’s citation of Bertolt Brecht on this matter here, if only to clear a space for the possibility of unorthodox models for the aesthetic representation of capitalism. Addressing the ‘complicated situation’ of capitalism’s real abstraction in ‘Little History of Photography’ (1931), Benjamin quotes Brecht on the limitations of aesthetic representations that, in one way or another, attempt to faithfully reflect reality; documentary photography, for example.

As Brecht says: “the situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification (Verdinglichung) of human relations—the factory, say—means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be built up (aufbauen), something artificial, posed.” 57

It is in terms of this theoretical conception of the way capitalism thwarts our ability to grasp its presence in, and impact on, social reality that I want to advance the idea that,

much in the way Brecht describes, Halley’s postmodernist abstractions “build up” an image or representation of social reality that can help us grasp or understand something about the social logic or content of capitalism concealed or normalised within the form of the various architectures, structures and systems represented in his painting.

And so, with this brief summary of the argument this thesis puts forward, we return to the title of this introduction—the question of the “incompleteness” of the art historical account of Halley’s paintings of the 1980s. To this I offer the following response: what is absent from the art historical scholarship on Halley’s paintings of the 1980s, what remains to be completed or put forward, is a rigorous account of the meaning and critical valence of Halley’s postmodernist attempt to represent capitalism through the language of past abstract art.

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I begin my analysis in Chapter One by introducing Halley’s core iconographic motifs and his general approach as an abstractionist. I explore how Halley’s postmodernist method of abstraction was established during a period of intensive studio experimentation, between 1980 and 1982, when the central iconographic and material innovations of the paintings were developed. In this chapter I also introduce and discuss the key ideas of theoretical essays, texts written for publication between 1981 and 1984. I consider the

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58 The title of this introduction is a play on the title of Pamela Lee’s essay Postmodernism: An Incomplete Project (her title, in turn, being a quotation and subversion of Jürgen Habermas’s lecture, ‘Modernism: An Incomplete Project’ (1980)). With this title, Lee explains, ‘I mean to flag the “incomplete project” that is postmodernism’s relation to art history and theories of contemporary art by extensions’. (Pamela Lee, New Games: Postmodernism After Contemporary Art (Routledge: New York and London, 2013), 1). I want to suggest that we take these words as emblematic of the central discursive strand in this thesis, also.
periodisation of post-war American history outlined in these texts, as well as the sustained concerns with technology and capitalist modernisation put forward. Above all, I explore how Halley’s essays conceptually extend the meaning of his core motifs, correlating them with historically specific, periodised, urban, economic, and technological social forms. As my analysis in Chapter One evidences, Halley’s motifs are developed over a relatively short amount of time between 1980 and 1982. However, he would go on to elaborate and develop each of these motifs simultaneously over subsequent years. Reflecting this, in Chapters Two and Three I isolate and study individual motifs in order to understand their specific impetus and grounding in social reality.

Chapter Two focuses on Halley’s prison motifs. My argument here concerns the impact moving to a crisis-ravaged Lower Manhattan in 1980 had on Halley’s painting. As I find, Halley’s “prison paintings” constitute, in a deadpan, cold, and lifeless way, the obdurate material presence of New York’s recently antiquated modernist built landscape. I frame these works as a meditation on the various ways New York was fundamentally reshaped during the postwar period by highly technocratic and rationalised processes of urban development with strong links to Fordist industrial protocols. I read Halley’s deeply referential decision to transform the minimalist square into a kind of architectural cage in these early paintings as an attempt to articulate a sense of being locked into a decaying, concretely or visually abstract, high rationalised urban landscape shaped by an obsolete historical force. This gives me pause to reflect on the vicissitudes of a social world ordered by the dead hand of technocracy and rational planning. If the reductive, enclosing, block-like geometry of Halley’s prison and
apartment paintings from this early period capture and express some sense of the experience of the imposing order of the obdurate modernist landscapes of urban renewal, then I also show ways in which other aspects of works from these early years back in New York—most notably Halley’s approach to colour, planarity, and background—represent or capture some sense of the social disorder that followed the breakdown of New York’s Fordist-era industrial economy. What I identify in the flatness, the numbing, achromatic colour, and sparse, empty visual fields of paintings made in 1980 and 1984 is the spectre of social disorder in the form of the economic crisis of Fordism and austerity measures introduced to rectify it. Taken together, Halley’s earliest paintings are thus marked by a contradiction between order and disorder related to the expiration or breakdown of post-war, late-industrial Fordist mode of production in New York City. It is the image built up through the play between these forces that, I argue, goes some way to representing the social experience of the aftermath of the collapse of New York’s once robust Fordist, industrial economy.

In Chapter Three, I explore ways in which a new iconographic element added to the painting in 1981—dynamic lines hidden “underground” in a second canvas panel bolted to an upper, main panel that Halley instructively names “conduits”—can be understood as a representation of the technological systems and networks underpinning an emerging economic system more or less resistant to representability or perceivability: finance. I also consider ways in which Halley’s sustained use of Day-glo paint from 1981 onwards captures something of the eerie light or glow of screen technologies that became increasingly prominent in 1980s America. These two new elements—the network and the screen—can be read as expressing a social
contradiction particular to the emerging *post-Fordist, post-Industrial* moment in New York. On the one hand, I read Halley’s ‘underground conduits’ as a meditation on aspects of *invisibility* characteristic of New York’s emphatic turn towards financialisation. On the other hand, I read Halley’s relentless use of Day-glo colour from 1981 onwards as an expression of the blinding and disorientating *overexposure* to the mesmerising or transfixing kind of technological light produced by computer screens and other media technologies.

In my conclusion, I theorise about ways we might consider Halley’s postmodernist abstraction to be a model of critical art by integrating the analysis of Chapters Two and Three into a Marxism-inflected theoretical framework. How did Halley’s art illuminate social aspects of past abstract art previously unseen or under recognised? What do Halley’s paintings help us understand about capitalism in New York at this particular historical moment, as well as the logical structure of capitalism at large? Finally, how did Halley’s paintings of the 1980s advance a new model for what postmodernist painting might be? These are the questions I seek to resolve in my conclusion.

However much Halley’s paintings of the 1980s are the focus of this dissertation, I want to underline that this is not a monographic study of his early work. This thesis concerns just a few years in Halley’s art—a period between 1980 and 1987—and, within that period, my analysis is largely skewed to the very earliest years in the development of the work, between 1981 and 1984. In addition, rather than attempting some sort of overview of the first decade of Halley painting, I have selected just a small number of key works for consideration. Finally, I should make clear that the approach I have taken
in this dissertation is fundamentally archival in logic. While I have been in contact with Halley since he invited me to write an essay for the catalogue raisonné of his 1980s paintings in 2017, I decided I wanted to work with and through the glut of existing interviews generated on his paintings—many of which have yet to be incorporated into research on the work—rather than formally conducting a new interview with Halley on the subject of his 1980s work. And while fragments from our potted email conversations since 2017 appear at points in the text, I mostly draw from interviews conducted since the 1980s for magazines, catalogues, books and archives in order to represent Halley’s viewpoint and position.

Against the idea of comprehensive monographic analysis, this study is better understood as an archival “thought experiment” concerning minimalist abstract geometric art, postmodernist forms of artistic production, and the philosophical question of how to represent capitalism. Halley’s paintings of the 1980s are an opportunity to think through the question of how to describe the way in which abstract painting relates

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59 See ‘Facts Are Useless in Emergencies’, in Peter Halley: Paintings of the 1980s. The Catalogue Raisonné (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2018). In that text (the title of which is, again, lifted from Talking Heads’s music—the phrase ‘facts are useless in emergencies’ features on ‘Crosseyed and Painless’, the second track on the band’s fourth studio album), I explored intuitive aspects of Halley’s painting, arguing that, however theoretically charged, Halley’s painting is ultimately based upon his own aesthetic experience of the world, rather than abstract ideas.

60 Beginning with an interview by critic Jeanne Siegel titled ‘The Artist/Critic of the Eighties’, published in the September 1985 issue of Arts magazine, Halley was an active participant in interviews throughout his career. Other important conversations I make use of in this thesis include an interview with Michele Cone, published in the February-March 1986 issue of Flash Art; a 1988 conversation with curator and critic Trevor Fairbrother in the catalogue for the exhibition Biennial: American art of the Late 80s. German Art of the Late 80s, held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston between September 23rd and November 27th, 1988; an interview with Margaret Sundell and Thomas Beller in the Summer 1988 issue of Splash; another interview in Flash Art, this time by the founder and editor of the magazine, Giancarlo Politi, in the January-February 1990 edition of the magazine; an interview with curator Kathryn Hixon for the catalogue for Halley’s first retrospective exhibition: Peter Halley: Oeuvres de 1982 à 1991, held in 1991 at CAPC, Musée d’Art Contemporain, Bordeaux; yet another interview in Flash Art, this time by critic Jeff Rian in the October 1995 edition of the magazine; A 2009 interview with Karlyn De Jongh for the book “Personal Structures: Time Space Existence”; an interview with interior designer Jim Walrod for the Autumn 2014 edition of Apartmento magazine; a conversation with curator Max Hollein, conducted as part of Halley’s 2016 exhibition at the Shinn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt; a 2018 interview with Tom McGlynn for The Brooklyn Rail; finally, long after my research had begun. Peter shared with me the transcript of an oral history conducted in 2021 at the Smithsonian Archives of American art between September and October 2021.
to economic and social forms and how historical references shape our understanding of what postmodernist painting can be. Halley’s art stages the curious ricochet between different qualities of abstraction particular to urban space and social reality in New York. Thinking through the different elements of this staging will pose many problems of interpretation in the coming pages. Yet these dilemmas will perhaps enable us to think through some of the deeper problems of artistic attempts to critically represent the worlds we occupy. By bringing the tiniest details of aesthetic or urban form to bear upon both local and global capitalist conditions and theories developed to represent these conditions, in this thesis I invest abstract painting with the capacity to reveal transformations in history. With this approach I not only hope to bring a fuller and deeper historical sense of the possible meaning of Halley’s paintings of the 1980s; I also hope to cultivate a conversation about a particular way of seeing the city, a particular kind of “abstract-critical perception”, that, unavoidably perhaps, notices capitalism lurking in every urban detail. Such a vision, in my opinion at least, could be understood as a useful tool for those seeking to understand capitalism amidst the opacity of its own abstractions.
Figure 0.1. *Peter Halley at International with Monument, 3rd–27th April 1986.*

Figure 0.2. *Peter Halley, Jeff Koons, Meyer Vaisman, and Ashley Bickerton at Sonnabend, 1986.*

Figure 0.4. Richard Prince (c.1977–1978). *Untitled (Couple)*. Ektacolor print, 59.7 x 77.8cm. Source. Private collection. http://www.artnet.com/artists/richard-prince/untitled-couple-IH6X_c8-SmVh4gw8xr2UuQ2
Figure 0.5. Robert Ryman (1962). *Untitled*. Oil on linen, 176.5 x 176.5cm. Collection: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City. [https://whitney.org/collection/works/17207](https://whitney.org/collection/works/17207)

Figure 0.6. Brice Marden (1970) *For Pearl*. Oil and beeswax on canvas, three panels, 243.8 x 249.6cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York City. [https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/207/2720](https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/207/2720)
CHAPTER ONE

Paintings and Essays (1980–1984)

Between 1981 and 1982, Halley established a pictorial repertoire of three core iconographic motifs: “prisons”, “conduits”, and “cells”. Halley would return to these motifs for decades to come, as if he had somehow discovered a set of hieratic symbols or personal relics of great importance in his first years back in New York City. Developed in the early months of 1981, prisons (Figure 1.1) are the first core motif to be introduced to the painting. Square forms, either freestanding against white, unprimed canvas, or coloured backgrounds; or occupying the entirety of a canvas’s surface in an ‘all-over’ way, prisons feature a square, grilled, window-like form in their centre marked out by five vertical and two horizontal black acrylic lines. While Halley at times adapts the basic format of his prisons—sometimes they are rectangular, and occasionally four rather than five vertical bars are used on the window—this symbol of containment or enclosure appears in the painting throughout the 1980s, and remains a central aspect of Halley’s artistic vocabulary today.¹ In the final months of 1981, and the early months of 1982, Halley introduced two further motifs. The thin, crisply rendered lines Halley calls conduits (Figure 1.2) move in rigidly prescribed ways through his painting. In doing so, conduits form an image of connection and movement that seems to push back against

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¹ Consider, for example, Still—a 2019 two-person exhibition with Ugo Rondinone at Modern Art, London. For the exhibition Halley presented a suite of new prison paintings, each featuring a multiplicity of silver and metallic coloured prison motifs densely packed into the space of the painting. These were shown alongside imposing, large-scale door and brick paintings by Rondinone.
the sense of enclosure generated by the prison motifs. Early in 1982, Halley began to experiment with basic square forms. Like prisons, cells (Figure 1.3) are either positioned as distinct figures within a landscape setting, or occupy the entirety of an upper canvas panel. However, cells do not feature any additional window-like detailing. The development from the prisons to the cells thus marks the abstraction of the prior form into a more general image of a unitary, self-contained sort of space. Crucially, from 1982 onwards cells form an iconographic partnership with conduits, establishing a kind of network imagery in the painting: cells appearing as point- or node-like figures linked together or connected in different ways by conduits. Halley did introduce further motifs during a fertile period of experimentation in the painting between 1982 and 1985, mostly other architectural forms, such as “tunnels”, “bunkers”, “chambers”, “towers”, and “smokestack factories”. However, these motifs featured in just a few works and never became established in the painting. And so, given how important prisons, conduits, and cells have become in Halley’s work, we can consider this early period in the development of the painting, when he was working in his first New York studio on East 7th Street in the East Village, to be the most significant in Halley’s career. As such, this period, and the motifs it generated, serve as the seedbed both for this chapter, and for this thesis as a whole.

The period of a year or so between 1981 and 1982 was not only a pivotal moment in the development of Halley’s painting. Having sent unsolicited articles to the editor of Arts Magazine early in 1981, Halley’s first published article, ‘Beat, Minimalism, New Wave and Robert Smithson’, a speculative analysis of conjunctions between literary, musical, and artistic cultures in post-war America, appeared in the May 1981
edition of the magazine. This marked the start of a period in which Halley wrote consistently for *Arts Magazine*. Between 1981 and 1984, Halley published four further essays with the magazine: a reading of Spanish philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset’s conception of modernism (‘Against Postmodernism: Reconsidering Ortega’ (1981)); a response to Ross Bleckner’s late-1981 solo exhibition at Mary Boone gallery, which had featured paintings that appropriated tropes of 1960s Op Art (‘Ross Bleckner: Painting at the End of History’ (1982)); a sweeping periodisation of the immediate post-war years in American art (‘Nature and Culture’ (1983)); and what is today Halley’s most widely read essay, an analysis of the relationship between ‘idealised’ geometry in a range of post-war formalist art projects and a periodised conception of ‘geometricised’ urban environments (‘The Crisis in Geometry’ (1984)). These texts established Halley as an artist engaged in a wide range of concerns, including: the historicisation of past art, in particular forms of minimalist abstraction from the late 1950s and 1960s; the periodisation of post-war American history; industrial and technological structures; systems and processes; and, perhaps most notably, contextualising both historical and contemporary artworks, as well as his own paintings and a range of social issues, via a number of prominent French theoretical voices (notably Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard).

I emphasise this final point because, as demonstrated in my introduction, by the time Halley’s work came to widespread prominence around 1985 and 1986, critics had become increasingly curious about the relationship between Halley’s painting and

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1 Halley would publish one further article with *Arts Magazine*: ‘Notes on Abstraction’, an experimental text collage combining his own prose with quotations from a range of artists and theorists, including Robert Smithson and Paul Virilio. This appeared in the summer 1987 edition. *Arts Magazine* would cease publishing in 1992.
'French theory’—as it was known in America. Halley’s citation of Foucault’s work on the history and social logic of prison, and Baudrillard’s exploration of the reality warping coordinates of postmodern or late-capitalist social reality, in ‘The Crisis of Geometry’, as well as in later essays and interviews given in 1985 and 1986, resulted in questions being raised about Halley’s use of these theoretical sources. Was Halley simply illustrating ideas drawn from fashionable continental philosophers? Was he using theoretical ideas to lend intellectual heft to what were considered to be somewhat conventional appropriations of past geometric art? With such questions hanging over the painting, it was common for critics to engage Halley on his use of theory. Speaking to Halley in 1985, art historian Jeanne Siegel set a precedent for this line of inquiry, first by cautiously probing around the question of the ‘theoretical guidelines’ Halley used in his work, then asking directly whether ‘the theory came first’? A year later, Michèle Cone questioned Halley along similar lines: were his paintings ‘pictorial thoughts’, or did they emerge from ‘recent readings of Foucault, Baudrillard or whatever’? In both cases Halley maintained the same response. To Cone he replied: ‘it's not that I had a thought about Foucault and therefore I'll make this painting. Rather, I'll be making a painting or I might be thinking about a painting and all of a sudden I realize some relationship between it and something I've read or thought about’. And to Siegel’s question Halley replied:
No, just the opposite [...] I think of myself as not a very good conceptualizer. So when I read Foucault’s ‘Discipline and Punish’, some of the things I was trying to get at in the paintings were very clearly conceptualized there and it helped me make conscious my own feelings about the subject. For me, things surface from subconscious sources and then I try to find out what they’re about, essentially. 7

Despite these explanations, two years later Halley was still being asked to expand on the relationship between his theory inflected writing and his paintings. And, by now, one can sense a touch of exasperation in Halley's reply to Margaret Sundell and Thomas Beller’s request that he confirm that his paintings do indeed proceed their theoretical contextualisation:

oh definitely, and people never believe me [...] my entire intellectual development has been about my response to the paintings I've made. The paintings are based on very automatist, subconscious sources. I imagine an image and then make a painting out of it. Then I start to think about what I’ve done. 8

To be clear, we should not take Halley’s claim here—that the core concerns of his early-1980s work were developed first in painting, and then only later conceptualised in writing—to suggest that his painting was established in some sort of theoretical or critical vacuum. Far from it. Yet another key claim of this chapter is that one must

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7 Siegel, ‘The Artist-Critic of the Eighties.
understand a number of key debates around incipient postmodernist art practices taking place in the New York art world in 1980 and 1981, just as Halley arrives in the city and begins to establish his method as an abstract painter, in order to understand the shape Halley’s work took in the early years of the 1980s. When Halley returned to New York in 1980, he arrived at a moment when critical debates around art seemed revivified after the slow going of the late 1970s. While all quarters of the New York art world felt the effect of these changes, a set of positions taken in the pages of October between 1980 and 1981 by two critics, Craig Owens and Benjamin Buchloh, seemed to capture the critical stakes of this moment.

First, in a two-part essay published in the Spring and Summer 1980 editions of October titled ‘The Allegorical Impulse: A Theory of Postmodernism’, Owens outlined the terms of what he called an ‘impulse’ towards allegorical structures of meaning in a number of contemporary artistic projects from New York. According to Owens, allegory—historically an often denigrated hermeneutic model—occurs when the meaning of a prior text is ‘doubled by another’ or ‘read through another’. Most prominent in Owens’ mind when considering contemporary artworks that adopt an allegorical structure were the works of the so called “Pictures Generation” artists. For Owens, what unified artists such as Sherrie Levine, Troy Brauntuch, and Robert Longo was a

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9 The early 1980s marked a pronounced shift away from the sense of stasis and exhaustion that many had identified as characteristic of the New York art world during the late-1970s. As critic and curator Scott Rothkopf has argued: “the unbridled critical enthusiasm that greeted the ‘80s can only be truly appreciated against the gloomy backdrop of the late ‘70s. “The decade is over. Don’t you feel better already?” John Perreault asked readers of his last SoHo Weekly News column of 1979. To many people who were active in the ‘60s, the ‘70s were a bore […] The art-world cliché is that nothing happened. For several years critics had been wringing their hands over what Carter Ratcliff dubbed an “often sluggish, always confusing” decade that lacked the effervescent yet focused innovation of the preceding one. “The 70’s has been a decade which felt like it was waiting for something to happen,” Kim Levin wrote in Arts in 1979. “It was as if history was grinding to a halt […]” […] Luckily for the art press, the ‘80s came right on time. In just one salubrious year, the ennui of the ‘70s gave way to a vivifying sense of epochal change, as Peter Schjeldahl demonstrated in January 1981 in his first column back at the Village Voice: “More is happening in American art right now than ever before. There is more of everything and everybody”. Scott Rothkopf, ‘Other Voices: Four Critical Vignettes’, Artforum (March 2003), 43.
tendency to ‘generate images through the reproduction of other images’, and, in doing so, ‘empty them of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning’.

Second, the tendency for postmodernist works to cannibalise past art discussed in my introduction was already a critical issue by 1981—featuring as the central concern of Benjamin H.D. Buchloh’s essay ‘Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting’. Published in the Spring 1981 edition of October, in that essay Buchloh singled out the ‘eclectic’ style of Neo-Expressionism for sustained criticism. The most prominent type of art in circulation during the early-1980s—the subject of multiple major survey exhibitions and a prominent feature of major international platforms, such as Rudi Fuchs’s 1982 Documenta 7 exhibition—Neo-expressionism, as described by Buchloh, appeared to draw mostly from European traditions of expressionist figuration from the 1910s and 1920s, movements such as Pittura Metaphysica in Italy, or Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany. In a reading that would set a precedent for the criticism of the work, Buchloh identified the incorporation of ‘visual codes of recognisability’ into Neo-expressionism with an incipient moment of historical exhaustion in art: namely, postmodernism.

These discussions taking place in 1980 and 1981 can be understood as being formative of the intellectual milieu or culture in which Halley broke through to the initial

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articulation of his own postmodernist model of painting. As such, I want to propose that we can consider these debates, and the concepts they put forward, as having a shaping influence on Halley’s formulation of his core motifs into an abstract visual language between 1981 and 1982. And so, while one the chief architects of ‘French theory’, Sylvere Lotringer, has claimed that in New York ‘the ’80s began in 1983’ (the date of his own imprint Semiotext(e)’s publication of Jean Baudrillard’s Simulations), my own argument is that in order to understand the theoretical stakes of Halley’s painting, we need to explore questions about postmodernist art circulating just before then.¹²

A further question I ask in this chapter concerns the degree to which we can consider Halley’s postmodernist method of abstraction to have, in turn, actively reshaped these discussions. To what extent do Halley’s paintings of the 1980s map a new model for a postmodernist painting; a model that does not illustrate pre-existing theories, but actually produces a kind of critical theory itself, in doing so laying out a new set of critical possibilities for painting in the 1980s? These questions raise the spectre of a third important critical debate circulating in New York in the first few years of the 1980s. In a back-and-forth discussion taking place in the pages of Artforum and October in 1981, critic Douglas Crimp and artist/critic Thomas Lawson vigorously debated the question of the critical potential of painting in the new decade. Lawson had originally been sympathetic to Crimp’s understanding of appropriation, writing one of the few reviews of his 1977 exhibition at Artist’s Space, while enthusiastically engaging artists included in that show in his written work. However, when, in his 1981 October essay, ‘The End of Painting’, Crimp roundly dismissed the critical potential of painting as

a medium, citing a number of reactionary tendencies undergirding what he described as a ‘resurrection of painting’, from Neo-expressionist pluralism, on the one hand, to the recalcitrant modernism of critic and curator Barbara Rose’s vision for the medium, as expressed in her residual belief in forms of transcendent, high-modernist abstraction, on the other, it raised an objection from Lawson.\(^\text{13}\) While no apologist, either for what he called ‘reactionary expressionism’, or for that matter, ‘the last manneristic twitches of modernism’ at work in Rose’s vision of American painting in the 1980s, in his October 1981 *Artforum* essay, ‘Last Exit Painting’, Lawson nonetheless launched a defence of painting’s critical possibilities. Citing Picasso’s synthetic cubism, an art historical moment important for Halley’s work too, as we will see, Lawson framed painting as a form of ‘perfect camouflage’. Far from the exhausted, dying, or even dead conception advanced by Crimp, as well as many of his peers in the early-1980s, in Lawson’s mind, painting remained an effective ‘deconstructive tool’—a device of ‘misrepresentation’ with the power to ‘undermine the certainty of appearances’.\(^\text{14}\) In a rapidly changing world, Lawson proposed, ‘the discursive nature of painting is persuasively useful, due to its characteristic of being a never-ending web of representations’. As such he concluded that ‘radical artists now are faced with a choice—despair, or the last exit: painting’.\(^\text{15}\)

A question I attempt to develop in this chapter regards whether Halley’s approach to quoting and subverting recently obsolete art, and his integration of theoretical ideas into his painting project, might offer one example of how painting did indeed continue to be a model of critical art in the 1980s. I want to now begin to further


\(^{15}\) Lawson, ‘Last Exit Painting’.
this inquiry by exploring how Halley developed and refined his key motifs between 1980 and 1982, during his first few years as a practicing artist in New York City.

1.1 1980: Walls and Prisons

In the early months of 1980, Halley was working on paintings he would later describe as ‘neo-Picassoid’. ‘I went through this intense Picasso phase between about ’78 and ’80 […] there was a sense of a frontal horizontal plane in which geometric things were piled. And that’s how I was thinking when I got to New York’.16 Pepsi Please (1980) (Figure 1.4), which features a crop-haired man dressed in the type of marinière or Breton shirt popularised by Picasso, and set against a crudely painted background composed of a jumble of interlocking geometries, is a key work from this early phase. The overall flatness, line rendering, cropping, and angled pose of the figure in Pepsi Please is reminiscent of one of Picasso’s synthetic cubist portraits. But the painting also has a somewhat cartoonish presence, an effect compounded by the placement of a caption box containing the capitalised words PEPSI PLEASE below the figure (a textual fragment that we can assume refers to the Pepsi Cola Company’s official slogan.

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16 Peter Halley, ‘Interview with Peter Halley’, interview by Kathryn Hixson, peterhalley.com (1991), accessed 24 May 2020, https://www.peterhalley.com/interview-with-kathryn-hixson. In the late 1970s, while completing his studies at Yale, Halley had been working on collages and works on paper that explored the geometric abstraction of non-Western art, including Islamic art, West African textiles, and First Nations art. However, as he told curator and archivist Annette Leddy in a 2021 oral history interview for the Archives of American Art, by 1979 he began to make ‘late-20th-century interpretations of Picasso’, in particular, interpretations of Picasso’s Synthetic Cubist portraits of the 1920s, in an attempt ‘to try to come to terms with the […] Western cultural tradition’. Retrospectively, and, I think, revealingly, Halley aligns this shift in the work with emerging postmodernist tendencies in painting: ‘it’s […] the beginning of the era that we can label postmodernism. So, there were similar things going on in architecture, where architects were trying to embrace history’. See Peter Halley, ‘Oral history interview with Peter Halley’, interview by Annette Leddy, Archives of American Art, 29 September—6 October 2021, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-peter-halley-22100, accessed 4 May 2022.
between 1957 and 1958, ‘Say Pepsi, Please’). *Pepsi Please* is a notable painting inasmuch as it is the last work by Halley to feature a clearly depicted human figure.

While retaining the planarity, muted palette, and textual elements of *Pepsi Please*, in the next painting Halley makes in 1980, *Vernon Jordan Shot* (Figure 1.5), the line-painted figure of the previous painting has been replaced by a triangular form made from contrasting cropped sections of pale yellow, light grey, and black. This triangle occupies the foreground of the canvas, and is set against a background divided by a horizon-like line that delineates an upper section—this contains the text VERNON JORDAN SHOT, which is boxed off from a cloudy white backdrop potted with dotted symbols—and a lower section rendered in dark grey.\(^\text{17}\) One can just about imagine that this triangle is a representation of a human figure of some kind. Given other references to Phillip Guston’s late-works in Halley’s early painting, one way of reading it is as a figure similar to the prominent and provocative Klansmen or ‘hood’ motifs that feature in Phillip Guston’s late-1960s paintings (Figure 1.6).

In works that immediately followed *Vernon Jordan Shot*, such as *Landscape* (1980) and *The Shadow* (1980) (Figures 1.7 and 1.8), the Guston-esque triangular figure just introduced to the painting begins to metastasise into angular, multi-sided triangle and star like geometries. Described by Halley as ‘geometricized figures—like some sort of sci-fi synthetic cubism’, the anthropomorphic, crystalline form in *The Shadow* seems to be falling away from the space of the painting, as if what is depicted is an odd geometric articulation of the twisted choreography of a tumbling human

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\(^{17}\) The text here refers to the attempted assassination of American civil rights activist Vernon Jordan in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on 29 May 1980.
This sense of unstable or compromised figuration is continued in next two paintings Halley made in 1980: *Interior* and *Jacob Wrestling the Angel* (Figures 1.9 and 1.10). Here Halley’s abstracted geometric figures have undergone yet further transformation—in the case of *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, transforming into a multicoloured, tessellated polygonal figure that tilts to the right of the picture’s centre, again as if falling away from the depicted scene. And this is just as a large and ominous brown brick wall looms into view behind it.

Moving away from abstracted anthropomorphic figuration, the new direction the painting was taking in the later months of 1980 was towards the depiction of inanimate features of the urban landscape, most prominently architectural forms, such as walls. However, before exploring Halley’s wall paintings in more detail, I want to briefly engage a painting that sits slightly out of joint with other works being made at this time. A large canvas, measuring 198 x 183cm, *The City* (1980) (Figure 1.11) features vertically organised rectangular block forms in black, muted blues, reds and natural colours. These forms are overlaid in dense clusters—generating an allusion to a skyscraper clad inner city skyline. The importance of *The City* to Halley’s developing painting practice can be identified in a particular kind of perceptual ruse generated by this painting. As one views *The City*, a kind of visual switching or flipping takes place. It is possible to see this image in two ways, either as a purely geometric arrangement of densely

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19 The disappearance of human figuration in 1980 marks a decisive turning point in Halley’s paintings. While his subsequent work will be concerned with the nature and logic of urban experience, this is an experience completely absorbed with abstract forms, systems and processes encountered in urban space. The question of the human within Halley’s work is therefore suspended or deferred. And while aspects of Halley’s painting seem to sublate his own emotions and experience (for example, as I will demonstrate shortly, his own sense of social isolation in New York feeds into the developing carceral aspect of his painting in 1980/1981), the general impulse of his painting from this moment onwards is towards inanimate urban and technological materials and processes.
imbricated coloured orthogonals, or as an urban landscape. This strategy—of creating images with shapeshifting properties, images capable of transforming back and forth between two possible readings right before the viewer’s eyes—would be something Halley continued to cultivate during this period of intensive development in the painting. *The City* can be understood, therefore, as a foundational work in Halley’s pursuit of a model of abstract geometric painting that plays with its own presentation by shifting between pure geometric form, and urban or social forms of different kinds.

The cultivation of forms with a kind of unstable semiosis would become a key aspect of Halley’s painting by the end of 1981. However, Halley’s next group of works would draw back somewhat from the breakthrough of *The City*. The paintings Halley would make through the end of 1980 and into 1981 instead focus on reductive, deadpan depictions of brick walls. This shift towards austere, imposing images of architectural forms marks the final termination of any allusion to human figuration in the work—no doubt a result of his growing awareness of the landscape surrounding him in New York City. As Halley would later explain, ‘in New York I really had a profound experience that the human figure was irrelevant, I stopped trying to pile up some sort of human figure, and began painting brick walls: “Just like home”’.  

Stacked in the traditional ‘one-brick over two’ pattern known as a stretcher or running bond, brick walls set against horizonless backgrounds become the central focus of Halley’s painting for a number of months between late 1980 and early 1981. Walls in paintings such as *The Death of Socrates* (1980), *Mausoleum* (1980), *Monet’s Dream*  

20 Peter Halley, ‘Interview with Peter Halley’. 
(1980), Red Wall (1980), Behind the Wall There is Another Wall (1981) (Figures 1.12–1.16) run horizontally across the picture plane, dominating the space within the frame of the painting while also suggesting that they might carry on beyond it, somehow. This sense of a form that continues beyond the bounds of the picture frame generates a tinge of anxiety in their viewer, as if one is being enclosed by the imposing structures depicted in these large-scale canvases. These are built forms that dominate space, limiting our ability to see anything beyond them. In Monet’s Dream, for example, a painting that measures 142 x 183cm, a slither of land and sky is just about visible beyond a dirty-brown wall. The place we are located in as viewers of this thin vista beyond the wall only seems to underline its obstructive presence, however; its effective blotting out of the pale baby-blue sky and wafer thin horizon line situated behind its hulking mass. Monet’s Dream thus epitomises the heavy, claustrophobic, enclosing atmosphere of all of the wall paintings made in late 1980 and early 1981. To view these paintings is to be confronted, face on, by constructions that enclose us, or block us into the flattened out geometric world we enter as viewers of Halley’s work.

Perhaps an effect of the resolute planarity of their geometry, as well as the odd scale of the depicted bricks, an aspect of caricature apparent in earlier works seems to return in the wall paintings. Indeed, we can identify a kind of humour in these otherwise heavy and deadpan works. Halley’s chunky bricks and the walls they form appear almost absurdly oversized—an instance, once again, of the influence of Philip Guston’s late-1960s painting on Halley’s thinking at this time. Indeed, one can compare any one of the brick walls in Halley’s paintings of 1980 and 1981 to a number of similar structures in Guston’s late paintings, works such as Untitled (1969) or Bug on Wall.
depiction of a brick wall. Yet for all their apparent levity, there is something imposing, if not almost threatening, about these paintings—an effect both of their scale and colouration.

Regarding the size of the wall paintings, this increased steadily over the course of 1980 to 1981. While the first in the series, *Lamentation* (1980), is just 114 x 114cm, *The Imagination of Disaster* (1981) (Figure 1.19), one of the final wall paintings, has increased to 196 x 295cm. This enlargement puts the later wall paintings in correspondence with certain mural scaled works of Abstract Expressionism—Barnett Newman’s (Figure 1.20) immense canvases of the 1940s and 1950s, for example.  As Clement Greenberg observed of Newman, as well as other painters working at scale such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clifford Still, in his essay ‘American Type Painting’ (1955), these artists had discovered a ‘way out’ from the limitations of the enclosing rectangle of easel painting by producing ‘a surface so large that its enclosing edges would lay outside or only on the periphery of the artist’s field of vision as he

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21 Halley’s background and upbringing established, at an early age, an affinity with New York School painting and culture. His Great Uncle, the publisher A.A. Wyn, was a significant influence in this regard. Wyn—the founder of Ace Books, a publisher specialising in comics, genre paperbacks and science fiction (Ace Books were the first to publish Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip K. Dick and Samuel R. Delany’s first book, *Junky* (1953))—had begun making New York School style abstract paintings after he retired in the mid-1960s. As Halley has explained in a recent article in *The New York Times*, he was a very smart man and his painting was quite good and intelligently done. He died a few years later, when I was 14, and left behind a fully equipped studio at his home in Larchmont, N.Y. I started painting in that studio. And I don’t think I would have become an artist if I hadn’t discovered painting. It was very fortuitous. He used geometric forms and a lot of colour. I’ve never, except for my own amusement, painted representationally, so right from the start, I was painting abstract paintings. ’ See Alice Newell-Hanson, ‘An Artist’s Life in Objects, From a Warhol Print to a Postmodern Lamp’, *The New York Times*, 27 October 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/27/magazine/peter-halley-design-art-collection.html. In an earlier interview Halley expanded on his relationship with New York School art: ‘I think […] because I grew up in New York, I have felt a really profound connection with the New York School, especially to the heroic artist intellectuals like Rothko, Newman and Ad Reinhardt. Since my father’s side of the family is Jewish and my family was somewhat intellectual, that gave me a particular affinity with the kind of intellectual roots that you see in the New York school of the ’50s, particularly its existential orientation. It was very much a part of my cultural environment.’ Peter Halley, ‘Interview with Peter Halley’, interview by Kathryn Hixson, peterhalley.com (1991), accessed 24 May 2020, https://www.peterhalley.com/interview-with-kathryn-hixson.
worked’. This not only relegated the importance of the frame itself to the status of a result of the painting, something arrived at rather than started with, it also produced paintings that absorbed their viewer. As Greenberg points out, with such immense works ‘one reacts to an environment as much as to a picture hung on a wall’.23

However, as opposed to the kind of resolutely abstract ‘environments’ produced by the painters of the 1940s and 1950s discussed by Greenberg, Halley’s wall paintings induce us into a representation of an actual urban environment. And, further, with some of the larger wall paintings there is a kind of verisimilitude being established with actual walls. As Halley later observed, he was at the time consciously moving towards making paintings that were, quite literally, ‘the size of a wall’.24 And yet, any correspondence with the absorbent space of mural sized canvases described by Greenberg is troubled by the very choice to depict walls. However much the scale of Halley’s wall paintings suggests the possibility of being drawn into the space of the painting, the obdurate, blocking presence of the architectural forms depicted assertively deny us access to the kind of spiritual or transcendent space cherished by the Abstract Expressionists. As Halley later explained, the wall paintings ‘were about the spiritual space of abstract expressionism being walled up, and also about the subdividing and blocking of space that I found characteristic of the urban environment’.25 We have, then, a sustained tension in the wall paintings: these are works that create an image of urban space that simultaneously induces and ejects the viewer—a tension that, in turn, begins to open

23 Greenberg, ‘American Style Painting’.
25 Fairbrother, ‘Interview’.
Halley’s work up to the harder, less transcendent work of minimalist abstraction, as I will shortly demonstrate.

But first, the question of colour. Greenberg also observed in ‘American Type Painting’ that the scale of the work of artists such as Newman, Pollock, and Rothko was an effect that operated in conjunction with their use of colour. What Greenberg saw in these artists’ work was epic surfaces that would ‘exhale colour with an enveloping effect’. The diffuse colouration of colour field paintings of Rothko and Morris Louis seems to have been in Halley’s mind when he chose to use very thin stained paint to generate a particular kind of emotionally charged atmosphere in these works. Indeed, there is something sapping, almost deathly, about the wan, milky light emitted, or ‘exhaled’, by these paintings.

However much the wall paintings established a correspondence with New York School painting, they also demonstrate what would become a much more prominent reference point for Halley’s work through the early years of the 1980s. There is, here, a growing interest in the syntax of modular forms, of the serial order of the brick itself. What this suggests is a different artistic citation—that of minimalist art. As Robert Morris observed in a 1967 interview with critic David Sylvester,

There’s a kind of order involved in this art that is not an art order.
It’s an order of made things that is pretty basic to how things have

26 Greenberg, ‘American Style Painting’.
27 The bleak, almost deathly atmosphere of Halley’s painting in 1980 and 1981 not only captures the grim presence of the city at this time, it was also an act of conscious mourning for a close relative. Halley’s grandmother on his father’s side, Pauline Halley, had passed away in January 1980. As he explained to me in email correspondence, ‘she was widowed and left to raise her only son, Rudolph, when she was 25 years old. She never remarried. Following the death of my father, she was determined to take an active role in my childhood. She personified for me the stoic pride and grim existential tenacity of the generation of secular New York Jews that also produced artists like Newman and Rothko.’ (Peter Halley, email conversation with by Paul Pieroni, 7th April, 2017)
been made for a very long time [...] The clearest example I suppose you could cite would be the kind of ordering and object quality that you get in maybe bricks and in the way bricks are used [...] It’s a kind of unit in a syntax that has been in the culture since the stone age, I suppose, and it’s still very basic to industrial-type manufacturing—standardisation and repetition and repeatability, the wholeness of a part that can be extended. 28

The wall paintings thus mark a turn towards an interest in the syntax of modular, standardised, repeatable orthogonal forms that would be critical for the subsequent development of Halley’s painting.

Having begun 1980 painting figures with a cartoon-like feel, moving through different iterations of geometric forms (triangles, and other, more complex, polygonal figures), it is with the wall paintings that we can see Halley begin to move towards geometric forms pitched somewhere between the austerity and seriality of minimalist art, and the absurdity or strangeness of Guston’s late painting. While Halley was moving closer towards refining his weird, simple-minded, or clunky minimalist artistic vocabulary with the wall paintings, the next development in the work—the introduction of prison motifs—would prove decisive. For what had been lacking from Halley’s painting, up to this point, was a signature iconographic motif. This, however, is precisely what Halley introduced in the next major canvas he made early in 1981.

Both the final wall painting Halley would make, and the first painting to feature a ‘prison’, The Prison of History (1981) (Figure 1.21) introduced a barred window-like icon into the painting for the first time. This iconic representation—which alludes to the

archetypal form of a prison window sealed up by horizontal metal bars—appears in the centre of a washed out grey-black cinder block wall featuring curiously reddened grouting (the only colour in this otherwise saturnine painting, it should be noted). Unlike previous walls, which ran across the picture alone or in pairs, this large, brooding structure stands freely in the centre of the canvas, surrounded by a murky, impenetrable black background. Positioned approximately at head-height for the average viewer, the barred window is marked out by five vertical and two horizontal black acrylic lines (or a square window frame with three centrally positioned vertical bars). Coupled with the move towards a freestanding, rather than continuous wall, the window suggests that this is an image of the façade of a building.

Underlining his earlier claim that, rather than being based on existing theoretical ideas his paintings were ‘subconscious’ in origin, in 1985 Halley explained that the barred prison window emblem derived from an uncanny encounter with the facade of the East Village loft in which he set up his home and first studio in New York in 1980. As Halley explained:

I lived in a building on 7th Street. On the ground floor there used to be a bar or a pub that had a stucco facade and windows with bars over them. I began to do the jail paintings, paintings of prison-type facades. I was in front of my building waiting for a friend one day and realized that I had, in fact, been using this image which I had never consciously noticed before—it was completely subconscious in origin.29

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29 Siegel, ‘The Artist-Critic of the Eighties’.
We can see the facade of 128 East 7th Street in two black and white photographs of Halley’s studio building from the 1980s (Figures 1.22–1.23). In one of these images, taken in 1985, Halley, hands tucked tightly in his blazer pockets, leans against the chunky, worn-down wooden door frame of his building. To his right is a stuccoed white wall at the centre of which, roughly at the height of Halley’s head, is a rectangular window. This window, which seems to be sealed from the inside, features an external metal grill of four vertical bars set within a riveted and decorated frame—a form that closely resembles the barred-window motif Halley introduced into his painting in *The Prison of History*. What this encounter suggests is a growing porosity developing between Halley’s painting and the immediate urban space surrounding him in New York. We can, therefore, understand the developing basis of Halley’s work to be his own, embodied—which is to say, aesthetic—experience of the city. As Halley would later reflect on the subject of his first few years working as an artist in New York, ‘I was picturing the kind of space I thought I was in’.

At this point in 1981, innovations in the painting were coming rapidly. Having established a crude basis for a distinctive iconographic unit in the form of a freestanding prison structure, in a painting made shortly after *The Prison of History*, *Little Spanish Prison* (1981) (Figure 1.24), Halley seems to clarify the iconographic development instigated by the introduction of the barred prison-window motif. Smaller than *The Prison of History*, at 76 x 102cm, *Little Spanish Prison* adopts the freestanding prison

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30 We can see this same window from a second photo from this period presented. Taken further back and no longer featuring the artist, the view captures the front of the restaurant occupying the ground floor of the building. We see an open cellar door on the floor, not one but two barred windows, a large air conditioning unit just above the entrance to the restaurant, and the white stucco surface of the buildings front across which the name of the venue is dotted, albeit with letters missing.

31 Hixson, ‘Interview’.
structure first introduced in *The Prison of History*. And yet, this painting rejects the
tenebrous gloom of the earlier work in favour of a lighter palette of off-white and light
grey. Faced with an altogether brighter, sharper image, our attention is now fully
captured by the prison structure, which stands boldly before us, a frontal emblem
positioned central to the canvases vanishing point.

As Robert Smithson observes in his short text *Pointless Vanishing Point* (1967),
linear perspective is an inherently anthropomorphic form of perspective that creates a
specific kind of subject out of the viewer, transforming them into an ideally located
surveyor of whatever scene is depicted in an image. From this ‘centrifugal’ view, the
world unfolds from the fixed point of the viewer, their embodied location, with ‘the
surveyor [imposing] his artificial [space] on the landscape he is surveying’.

And while Smithson bemoans the ‘hidden anthropomorphism’ concealed within this ‘surveyor
space’, preferring instead, as Ann Reynolds observes, the abstract, crystalline, mirrored
perspective of the enantiomorphic paradigm, this perspective seems quite apposite for
Halley—an artist who paints from a relatively uncomplicated embodied perspective, and
produces artworks (as well as essays, as I explore later in this chapter) that seem to be
at ease with the idea of the act surveying itself—whether it is the urban landscape, or
recent history that is his focus.

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32 This title is an appropriation of the title of Robert Motherwell’s *The Little Spanish Prison* (1941–1944), a small oil on
canvas work now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The repeated vertical bands of Motherwell’s
painting, though implicitly abstract, suggest the bars of a prison cell. The title of the work is an allusion to the Spanish
Civil War (1936–1939).


34 Smithson, ‘Pointless Vanishing Points’.

91–92.
As Smithson understood too well, linear perspective is also a characteristic of a lot of 1950s and early 1960s geometric painting. Indeed, *Little Spanish Prison* seems to signal the clarity and emblematics of a range of painting projects from this period. Evident here are allusions to Jasper Johns’s “everyday” emblems, his number and flag paintings, for example; John McLaughlin’s crisp, spiritually charged linear markings (this is especially true of the prison bar icon); and to the “logotype” aesthetics of Frank Stella’s mid-1960s paintings. Yet of all these references, perhaps the most obvious is to the plate-like, overlaid squares of Josef Albers’s painting.\(^\text{36}\)

A foundational figure in the tradition of American geometric abstraction, Albers is best known for his series *Homage to the Square* (Figure 1.25), which he began in 1949 and which continued until his death in 1976.\(^\text{37}\) Taking an approach to painting that was relentlessly austere, geometric, and anti-gestural, this series set out to explore tensions between the quiddity of square forms, and the capacity for colour to generate impactful illusions of form, space, and hue.\(^\text{38}\) As curator and art historian Michael Auping describes it, Albers ‘drastically restricted his format to a series of three or four differently coloured squares within squares’, in doing so eschewing ‘the relational, asymmetrical

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\(^{36}\) This relationship with Albers’s work has its roots in Halley’s early artistic education. As has been well documented, Albers was a renowned educator. Having been both a student and instructor at the Bauhaus in Dessau from 1920 to 1933, Albers was forced to flee Germany when the school was closed in 1933, following years of pressure from the Nazi regime, who deemed the Bauhaus to be a ‘degenerate’ expression of cosmopolitan modernism. Moving to America, Albers put forward his ideas regarding geometric abstraction as a teacher at a number of prominent American schools, including Black Mountain College (1933–1949), Harvard (1936–1941), and Yale (1951–1960). When attending prep school at Phillips Academy in Andover, Halley entered the schools renowned 3-year course of artistic study. While originally oriented towards Abstract Expressionism, by the time Halley arrived at Andover in 1967, the course had shifted towards Bauhaus principles – many of its teachers having been trained at Yale by Albers. Here what Halley describes as his ‘talents in design, color and general abstract problem-solving’ in painting were cultivated, alongside a sense of the connections between art and wider cultural and social contexts’. Peter Halley, ‘Interview with Peter Halley’, interview by Kathryn Hixson, peterhalley.com (1991), accessed 24 May 2020, https://www.peterhalley.com/interview-with-kathryn-hixson

\(^{37}\) Pearlman, *Unpacking Art of the 1980s*, 125.

composition of Mondrian for an obdurately frontal, holistic image [that] substituted relational forms for the relativity of colour, creating a remarkable range of emotional and optical effects’.  

Albers was, of course, not a Minimalist. However, his work appears to represent a kind of generic relationship to geometry, a sense of geometry as pure form, that was equally the conception held by later generations of Minimalist artists. As Auping observes, ‘Albers […] must be considered a patriarchal figure for an American aesthetic that would become increasingly abstract, literal, and reductive. The stringent geometric and serial-orientated art of the Minimalists that developed in the 1960s seem like reverent offspring’. And so, when Halley refers to ‘the minimalist square’ he seems to be pointing to, yet subverting, the traditional formalist conception of this most basic geometric form.

While the geometric order of Little Spanish Prison references the reductive geometry of the Homage to the Square series, the presence of an apparently figurative or symbolic motif right in the middle of the depicted square—the barred prison window—compromises the purity of Albers’ work. As Halley would later explain, his prison motif came about as a way of describing the minimalist square as a confining structure. I thought if I put bars on the square, it would very quickly go from being a classical or pure element to a sort of negative one, or one that would be a quick way of making it into a critical element.

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39 Auping, Fields, Planes, Systems, 32.
40 Auping, Fields, Planes, Systems, 34.
41 Siegel, ‘The Artist-Critic of the Eighties’.
As Halley would later explain to Karyln de Jongh, ‘a lot of my early work is the result of questioning Minimalism and re-opening Minimalist signifiers to point to society, to social space, etc. All of a sudden, squares could become prisons’.42 In Chapter Two I take up and explore the context of enclosure and containment Halley identifies in the minimalist square in more detail. However, I want to now turn to the two other motifs introduced into the painting in 1981 and 1982: conduits and cells.

1.2 Conduits and Cells

*Prison with Conduit* (1981) (Figure 1.26) is the first of Halley’s paintings to feature a conduit. A rare work in a portrait format (Halley’s work usually adopts a landscape or square format), this painting – 137 x 91cm in size – is composed of two bolted together canvas panels. The upper of these panels features a recognisable prison motif, rendered in white acrylic mixed with Roll-a-Tex, a textural additive that produces a thick, crenulated surface on Halley’s painting (Figure 1.26a). The format and execution of this motif is similar to the prison that first appeared in *Little Spanish Prison* (1981). However, the white acrylic background of the earlier painting has been abandoned. Here, instead, the prison motif takes on a holistic, “all-over” effect, covering the entirety of the upper canvas panel with a thickened or hardened surface that pins the eye down with its weighty materiality. The second, lower canvas panel matches the width of the upper panel and extends the overall length of the painting by a third. Though flushly joined together, this second panel is rendered in eye-popping red Day-
glo acrylic. Halley’s use of Day-glo here results in a painting that projects an eerie kind of glow outwards from the surface of the painting—as if the second panel is somehow internally lit. This second, vividly coloured canvas is itself divided by a crisp conduit of black acrylic that moves horizontally across the second canvas at its mid-point, before splitting either side of the middle of the canvas and travelling, at two separate points, upwards, seemingly into the motif above it. The three elements just described: the addition of a second canvas, conduits and Day-glo paint, would all go on to become central features of the work for decades to come, making Prison with Conduit one of the most important works Halley made in the 1980s.

If prisons suggest an image of containment, fixity, and isolation, then conduits contradict this image by symbolising movement and connection in the painting. Neither static or fixed, Halley’s conduits are reminiscent of lines in past examples of minimalist abstraction: the mono-directionality of Barnett Newman’s “zips” for example (Figure 1.27); or Frank Stella’s deductive, motile stripes (Figure 1.28). Like Halley’s conduits, Newman’s zips and Stella’s stripes are not lines of freewheeling action (as opposed to Pollock’s tumbling, spinning skeins of dripped and poured paint, for example). Rather, they follow specific pathways and, in doing so, symbolise forms of orderly, controlled, structural movement.

Conduits also suggest themselves as tube or pipe-like containers (‘conduit’ from the Latin conductus—a leading, a pipe). And this is something grounded, once again, in an immanent sensual encounter between Halley and built space in New York. As Halley has explained of the moment he first began thinking about conduits:
I was working on this idea of the square becoming a prison […] I was […] at home, listening to the radio, turning on electric lights, being able to turn on the faucet, flush the toilet, talk on the telephone, turn on the air conditioner. I began to become obsessed with the idea that all these natural things—air, light, noise or speech were being piped in. I began to think about conduits.  

As this experience suggests, we are encouraged to read conduits as infrastructural elements comparable to commonplace network systems, such as those of utilities and communications systems, or the tunnels of subterranean transportation. Conduits can, therefore, be understood as relational motifs, structures that form connections and relays in the painting between fixed forms, such as prisons, and the third and final motif introduced into the painting in the early months of 1982: cells.

First appearing in *White Cell with Conduit* (1982) (Figure 1.29), Cells are simple square forms that mark a shift towards a higher level of abstraction in the painting. Like the breakthrough work *Prison with Conduit* (1981), *White Cell with Conduit* has a lower canvas panel rendered in Day-glo red bisected by a bifurcated black acrylic conduit. However, in addition to being larger than its precursor (*White Cell with Conduit* is 157 x 122cm, whereas *Prison with Conduit* is 137 x 91cm), the upper white acrylic with Roll-a-Tex panel no longer displays a central barred prison window icon, being blank or featureless instead.

The appearance of cells late in 1982, soon after the conduits, marks the moment Halley’s “cell and conduit” motifs were in place, alongside his prisons. This later unit of

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*Siegel, ‘The Artist-Critic of the Eighties’.*
motifs allowed Halley to represent a more holistic kind of ‘network vision’ in his painting—an image of isolated units linked together by way of an underground network of pipe- or cable-like conduits. As Halley has explained: ‘by the time I had codified that system of imagery—of cells and conduits—I began to feel that I had come up a kind of paradigm, or model, or representation of a very basic kind of space, and spatial experience in our society’.44 While I explore the paradigmatic kinds of connected, networked space suggested by Halley’s cell and conduit systems in Chapter Three, I think it’s useful to trace a few connections between the model of schematised, networked abstraction Halley had developed by 1982, and some relevant examples drawn from past art.

On the one hand, considering an early “network painting” like White Cell with Conduit (1982), this work clearly resonates with a kind of cybernetic artistic imaginary that is firmly rooted, once again, in late-1950s and 1960s art. Though abstracted, we can imagine the interplay between bifurcated conduits and cell here as a diagrammatic depiction of the relays and nodes in a computer’s labyrinthine circuit board. However, as art historian Ina Blom has observed, much cybernetic art of the 1960s was not iconic in the way of Halley’s painting, but indexical (Blom cites the ubiquity of computer ‘drawing machines’ in Jasia Reichhardt’s seminal exhibition Cybernetic Serendipity, held at London’s ICA in 1968 as evidence for this—Ivan Moscovich’s pendulum harmograph, for example, or Desmond Paul Henry’s randomised analogue drawing system).45 That said, Blom also observes that, in a number of projects on the periphery of Cybernetic

44 Hixson, ‘Interview with Peter Halley’.
Serendipity, such as Lowell Nesbitt’s paintings of IBM computer equipment (Figure 1.30), or Ula Wiggen’s enigmatic and obsessive depictions of compiler circuitry and electronics (Figure 1.31), there is a tendency towards iconic technical representation adjacent to the main indexical impulse of 1960s cybernetic art. On the other hand, somewhat unusually for Halley given the strong rooting of his references in post-war American art, we might also frame his cell and conduit paintings in terms of an earlier moment of mechanical enchantment in art, what Blom has described as ‘all those subtle and not-so-subtle mediations of modern industrial infrastructure and engineering […] Francis Picabia’s mechanomorphic portrait-drawings, [the] disarticulated, diagram-like bodies that appeared in the Dada journals 291 and 391’ [for example] (Figure 1.32).

However simplified or reductive, Halley’s conduits and cells operate in conjunction to create technical or systems-like images which hark back, in different ways, to earlier moments of mechanical interest in art.

Let me now briefly take stock of the key iconographic developments that took place in Halley’s painting between 1980 and 1981. Seemingly in pursuit of a signature style or artistic language, in two short years Halley introduced, worked through, then abandoned a number of iconographic ideas in quick succession. This period of experimentation led to the establishment of “prisons” as Halley’s first key motif, as outlined above. This was soon followed by “conduits” and “cells”. And so, by the end of 1982, after a period of intensive work in his studio, Halley’s thinking had crystallised around a stable aesthetic vocabulary. Along the course of this accelerated period of

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46 Blom, ‘Closed Circuit’.
47 Blom, ‘Closed Circuit’.
development in the painting, we can see many of the key ideas of Halley’s work coming into focus. As such, we are now in a position to make a provisional outline of some of the fundamental operations and procedures taking place in Halley’s particular model of postmodernist painting.

1.3 A Double-Coded Pastiche

By 1981 Halley had cultivated a method for creating an unstable symbolic space in his painting. The main aspect of this instability sees the geometry of minimalist artworks collapse into a set of spatial references: to landscape, to built forms, and to network-like systems or structures. The elliptical relations generated by this procedure are both representationally suggestive (minimalist forms are transformed into specific things in the real world) and historically provocative (the idea of minimalist form as pure or transcendent is countered by the suggestion that these forms might, in fact, represent specific things in the real world). In this way, Halley cultivates a form of painting with the power to ‘switch’ or ‘flip’ between pure abstraction and abstracted representation. The result is a defamiliarising model of abstraction.

I want to briefly lay out an argument here regarding the theoretical significance and critical power of this defamiliarising strategy. To do this I want to return to a postmodernist theoretical operation discussed in the introduction to this chapter: that of the ‘allegorical impulse’ outlined by Craig Owens in his two-part October essay ‘The Allegorical Impulse: A Theory of Postmodernism’ (1980). The task of Owens’ essays is to explore contemporary artworks with an idiomatic allegorical image structure. As Owen makes clear,
Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other (*allos* = other + *agoreuei* = to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured: allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. This is why allegory is condemned, but it is also the source of its theoretical significance.\(^48\)

While the allegorical operation Owens identified in Pictures Generation art was largely an intervention upon *contemporary* media imagery, Halley’s own approach is to double-code images from *past art*—in doing so actively reshaping the kind of argument made

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\(^{48}\) Craig Owens, ‘The Allegorical Impulse’, *October*, 12 (Spring 1980): 69. One way to reframe the concept of allegory is in terms of Roland Barthes’ seminal essay ‘The Death of the Author’ (1967). Though first translated into English in 1967 and included in issue no. 5–6 of American magazine *Aspen*, it was only in 1977, with the publication of Barthes’ anthology of essays *Image-Music-Text* that this essay came to widespread prominence in America. In the essay, Barthes argues that, against relying on the intentions and background of the author to establish the definitive meaning of a text, the capacity for each individual reader to find their own meanings should be emphasised. See Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 142–148. Speaking during a 2003 *Artforum* roundtable discussion on the subject of the ‘Death of Painting’ debates of the early 1980s, art historian David Joselit explicitly aligned these discussions with Barthes’ text: ‘In Barthes’ canonical text, which was widely read in the 1980s, the Death of the Author was one and the same with the Birth of the Reader. Perhaps the “new rules”, which allow new painterly permutations to emerge, codify such a displacement from the writerly to the readerly. Tactics of appropriation, which I regard as closely linked to postmodern painting, certainly fit within this category’. See ‘The Mourning After: A Roundtable with David Joselit, Yves-Alain Bois, Thierry de Duve, Isabelle Graw, David Reed, Elisabeth Sussman’, *Artforum* (March 2003), accessed 19 April 2022, https://www.artforum.com/print/200303/the-mourning-after-a-roundtable-4321. Halley has cited Barthes’ influence repeatedly in interviews. Speaking to critic Karlyn de Jongh in 2009 on the subject of Minimalism, Halley stated that ‘I could never accept the hermetic self-referential claims of Minimalism. Donald Judd, for example, said that the forms in his work didn’t refer to anything, that they were in effect signifiers without signifieds. In the 80s, with the influence of Roland Barthes and others, the issue of the signifier all of a sudden became opened up again’. See de Jongh, ‘Peter Halley’. And Halley makes repeat allusions to Barthes’ work in his 2021 unpublished oral interview with Anne Leddy for the Archives of American Art, including this statement: ‘all through the late ’70s, I was trying to find—I don’t want to call them representational—but signifieds to a geometric signifier. What does geometry signify in a painting? And the idea that signifieds had multiple signifiers was something that was emerging in the thinking—in the books of Roland Barthes. And how any sign can have—not just have one predetermined meaning, but will have many meanings built by the audience’. See Leddy, ‘Oral History Interview’. 
by Owens, while retaining its critical potential. As Owens suggests, the doubling of one image by another is an effective way to put forward some sort of critical commentary or judgement upon it. And while we only get hints at a critical programme developing in Halley’s work by attending exclusively to his paintings (we can already see that Greenbergian formalism—as a transcendent, self-contained model of artistic significance—is being confronted in Halley’s early paintings, for example) by consulting Halley’s essays, the subject of the next section in this chapter, some of the wider critical implications and possibilities of Halley’s double-coding of past art will become clear.

The second postmodernist theoretical operation emerging in Halley’s early painting concerns the quotation of past art. As already mentioned, around 1981 the discussion regarding painting was dominated by the return bold, gestural figurative brushwork, energised self-expression, and eclectic pictorial ensembles. One obvious way in which Halley subverts this impulse is by returning to an abstract, rather than figurative, idiom. But Halley’s approach to quoting past abstraction develops the discourse around Neo-expressionist ‘regression’ in another, more significant way.

Returning to Benjamin H.D. Buchloh’s essay ‘Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting’ (1981), we can say that one thing that stood out for Buchloh about Neo-expressionism was the way that past artistic traditions or movements were being used as sources in a way that seemed to have little or no regard for their original historical specificity or context—something Buchloh judged to be ‘the very gem of reified art-historical thinking’.

49 Buchloh, ‘Figures of Authority’, 52–53.
The ideological equivalent of the commodity: its universal exchangeability, its free-floating availability indicating a historical moment of closure and stasis. When the only option left to aesthetic discourse is the maintenance of its own distribution system and the circulation of its commodity forms, it is not surprising that [...] paintings start looking like shop windows decorated with fragments and quotations of history.\(^{50}\)

While Buchloh’s essay responded to European Neo-expressionism, this criticism was later taken up by Hal Foster, who argued that the Neo-expressionist impulse in American art signalled the ceding of avant-garde standards to a pluralistic “anything goes” approach:

Alienated from new mediums, these artists return to old forms [...] Yet rarely are these old forms newly informative: painting in particular is the scene of an often vapid revivalism [...] Though the habit of the historicist—to see the old in the new – remains with such art, the imperative of the radical—to see the new in the old—is lost. [With this art] history [becomes] a monument (or ruin)—a store of styles, symbols, etc. to plunder.\(^{51}\)

Looking at a key early work of American Neo-expressionism from this period, such as Julian Schnabel’s *Exile* (1980) (Figure 1.33), can help us understand Buchloh’s

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\(^{50}\) Buchloh, ‘Figures of Authority’, 52–53.

allusions to painting being reduced to a ‘shop window’ containing ‘fragments and quotations from history’; or Foster describing art history as ‘store of styles’ to be plundered, without much care or consideration for historical context.

Exile features a surface stained with a wash of oxide yellow and intermittently marked by zones of ambient, globular colour. Layered over this chromatic base is a bizarre arrangement of effects. A youthful figure lifted from Caravaggio’s Boy with Basket of Fruit (c.1593) (Figure 1.34); the head of a Persian elder; what appears to be a crudely line rendered representation of a wooden toy; and, most prominently, four sets of real antlers, which are fixed to the surface of the painting and jut outwards from it. Exile is a theatrical, enigmatic mess of a painting that combines historical references (to Abstract Expressionism, as well as to late-Renaissance painting and classical art) alongside invented images and found sculptural elements. Exile presents a visual field as fragmented as its historical references. In this way it concurs with the image of projected upon Neo-expressionism by Buchloh and Foster. Yet, if we pay attention to the way Halley uses past artistic references in his paintings from 1980 and 1981, we can see that there is none of the lively chaos or referential sprawl of Schnabel’s work. Rather, we can say that Halley’s quotations of past art are far more specific and integrated.

In terms of specificity, Halley’s references are drawn, in the main, from American geometric abstraction of the late-1950s and early-1960s. As I have just shown, Halley invokes the atmospheric, emotionally charged colour and impactful scale of the colorfield painting of Rothko; the hard-edged facture and emblematic or logotype and motifs of early minimalist paintings by Albers, Stella and Noland; and the modular, serial
logic of early-Minimalist “sculpture”. We also have other references to late-1950s and 1960s art: the everyday emblems of Johns, for example, the absurdism of Guston’s post-abstraction figurations of the late 1960s, and even to the cybernetic turn in 1960s art.

In terms of integration, Halley’s quotation of past art operates on a structural level, shaping his approach to inventing and developing a limited ensemble of signature iconographic motifs. In many ways, Halley’s orientation towards these motifs follows a predictable pattern for the development of an abstract geometric artistic practice as it was understood by artists working in America in the mid-twentieth century, or just after. By this time, abstraction had become a system within which individual artists needed to invent their own motifs, to find their signature forms. Once established, these forms constitute a kind of iterative vocabulary for the artist—an expected structure for the work within which the artist would slowly work with for the rest of their career, by way of small changes. Consider the soft-edged, irregular, and painterly zones of rectangular colour Mark Rothko used in his painting from the late 1940s onwards (Figure 1.35); or Barnett Newman’s “zips”—slim bands of vertical colour linking the upper and lower margins of his paintings (Figure 1.36). There are countless other examples from this period of abstract art in America: Pollock’s skeins of dripped and poured paint (Figure 1.37); Morris Louis’s “veils”, “unfurled”, and “stripes” made from thin washes of acrylic colour on unprimed canvas (Figure 1.38); Frank Stella’s “stripes” (Figure 1.39); Kenneth Noland’s “targets” (Figure 1.40); Jasper Johns’ “flags” (though these are not in any obvious way ‘abstract’) (Figure 1.41); and Donald Judd’s “stacks”, “boxes”, and “progressions” (Figure 1.42). These motifs shape how we receive what are otherwise
works marked by an absence of interpretative cues or handles. In a way you have to talk about Rothko in terms of looming rectangles, or Newman in terms of dynamic zips—the very logic of these abstractions, the way they progress through small changes to a set visual language, demands it.\(^2\) Between 1980 and 1982, Halley set out to develop his own vocabulary of forms, in doing so placing his work in dialogue with the tradition of American geometric abstraction on a structural level.

Another crucial aspect of mid-century American abstraction that Halley fully absorbs or integrates into his work is the importance of iconographical naming. This is something particularly evident in Barnett Newman’s work. When Newman names the key iconographic device in his work a “zip”, he guides the interpretation of this form—a zip suggests a kind of vertical movement that seals something together, that ‘zips it up’. Likewise, Halley’s naming of his core motifs gives us ideas as to how these forms are to be understood or taken. Most obviously, prisons indicate an abstract form marked by containment or enclosure. Likewise, conduits suggest some sort of pipe or funnel-like form: a tube through which content of some sort might pass. On one level, Halley’s cells appear to repeat notions of imprisonment suggested by the prisons. Yet, a cell also has more generic connotations as an abstract signifier for a kind of self-contained or enclosed space in which certain forms of activity take place—whether a microscopic unit of a biological organism; a small device for turning solar or chemical energy into electricity; or a small, possibly secret or subversive political group. Through

\(^2\) Citing Stella’s approach as central, Halley has described the process of change and development in his work as ‘[…] glacial. Imperceptible. Usually I don’t realise I have made a change until after the change has occurred. I don’t understand what the changes are about until well after the work has been done. Ever since I was a student, I have been fascinated by artists who work in terms of very small changes’. See Hixson, ‘Interview with Peter Halley’.
iconographic naming Halley suggests a semiotic logic for his abstract forms—he primes how we might experience and understand them.

Holding both the specificity and integration of Halley’s ‘pastiche’ of past art in mind, while Halley’s work was without doubt shaped by tendencies towards quoting past art circulating in the early-1980s art world of New York, his particular method of abstraction actively reshaped notions of how pastiche might operate in postmodernist painting. And so, while it’s clear that Halley’s core motifs emerged from purely subconscious or intuitive situations—the moment outside his loft on East 7th street; or the moment inside his loft turning on taps and other utilities—the model of painting Halley had developed by early 1982 was firmly grounded in incipient postmodernist discourses. As such, we can describe Halley’s painting as advancing a “double-coded pastiche” that involved taking tropes of past art, in particular forms of minimalist geometric abstraction, and recoding these tropes so as to establish a set of clunky and awkward core motifs that allude on the one hand to architectural forms, and on the other to network-like systems and structures.

With an understanding of the theoretical procedure at work in Halley’s painting in place, I want to now turn to Halley’s essays from this period. Halley’s writing during the 1980s includes fourteen short texts written for art magazines or for small, independent journals, such as Effects, as well as New Observations.\textsuperscript{53} In the following analysis I

\textsuperscript{53} Both Effects and New Observations were independent art journals. Effects was founded by curatorial duo Collins and Milazzo in 1983. Billed as a ‘magazine for new art theory’, it ran for three issues between 1983 and 1986. Contributors included David Salle, Joan Wallace, Troy Brauntuch, Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, Ericka Beckman, Jack Goldstein, Gretchen Bender, Ross Bleckner, Louise Lawler, Allan McCollum, Peter Nagy, Tyler Turkle, Steven Parrino, Tricia Collins, Sarah Charlesworth, Robert Longo, James Welling, Oliver Wasow, Carroll Dunham, Peter Nadin, Joseph Nechvatal, Meyer Vaisman, Carlo McCormick, Julie Wachtel, and Jonathan Lasker, amongst others. New Observations was a non-profit contemporary arts journal that ran between 1981 and 2001. It was edited and published by the arts community in a collective process. In the same spirit as these publications, the East Village art scene that Halley emerged from was independent and artist led. In particular, Neo-geo art emerged from the programmes of two East Village galleries, International with Monument and Nature Morte. International with
explore a selection of these texts, examining how they conceptually extend and amplify the meaning of Halley’s core motifs, as well as how they can help us grasp the critical stakes of Halley’s postmodernist abstraction.


It should be noted that Halley seldom addressed his own work in his early writing. It is not until ‘The Crisis in Geometry’ (1984) that he introduces a framework for understanding his motifs, and even here the reference is somewhat glancing. Rather, Halley’s early writing focuses on the work of other artists, writers, and theorists, past and present. It also explores questions of art history, in particular questions concerning the social basis or logic of artistic form, as well as engaging a range of issues regarding post-war history in America. Reading Halley thus requires that we ‘join the dots’, as it were, between his writing and painting, a speculative procedure that I want to begin now with an exploration of Halley’s first published essay, ‘Beat, Minimalism, New Wave, and Robert Smithson’ (1981).


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Monument was founded by three artist friends, Meyer Vaisman, Elizabeth Koury, and Kent Klamen in 1984. Working out of a storefront on East 7th Street, the gallery gave both Jeff Koons and Halley their debut solo exhibitions, as well as producing highly visible exhibitions by Ashley Bickerton, Sarah Charlesworth, Richard Prince, and Laurie Simmons, before closing in 1987. Nature Morte was in many ways the model for International with Monument. Founded in 1982 in an East 10th Street storefront by two artists, Alan Belcher and Peter Nagy, the gallery showed younger artists working in a conceptual register, such as Steven Parrino, Gretchen Bender, Cady Noland, and Haim Steinbach, alongside more established artists, such as Barbara Bloom, Keith Sonnier, and Louise Lawler. Nature Morte closed in 1988. See Dan Cameron ‘International with Monument’, Artforum, (October 1999), accessed 6 November 2020, https://www.artforum.com/print/199908/international-with-monument-847; and ‘Peter Nagy on Decades as an Artist and Dealer’, ArtNews (24 July 2020), accessed 6 November 2020, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/peter-nagy-deitch-gallery-show-1202695250/.
distinct moments in post-war American culture: Beat literature of the 1950s; 1960s Minimalist art; and the burgeoning contemporary ‘New Wave’ scene in downtown New York, alongside an engagement with the written work and artistic legacy of Robert Smithson. Central to the importance of this essay is its interpretation of the imagery in Allen Ginsberg’s epic poem *Howl* (1954–1955). Halley, who has family connections with the Beat movement, interprets *Howl* as a protest against ‘the tortuous structure’ of the modern city, and the horrifying possibilities of new technologies:

> The hell he describes is lived out in “robot apartments” and “invisible suburbs,” in “empty lots and diner backyards,” in “movie houses rickety rows,” on “tenement roofs,” and in front of a “neon blinking traffic light.” Ginsberg’s obsessions [are] with urban life, the terrifying products of science and industry, and the structure of commerce.54

Taking its cue from *Howl*, Halley’s essay attempts to apprehend a shared sensitivity to what he describes as ‘America’s […] vulnerability to the impact of technological change’. This is a concern, he argues, that unifies the different post-war artistic movements explored in the essay—all of which, in different ways, respond to the impact of technologically driven social development in the post-war, late-industrial era in America.

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54 Peter Halley, ‘Beat, Minimalism, New Wave and Robert Smithson’, in *Selected Essays*, 46. Halley’s father, Rudolph Halley (1913–1956), was the first cousin of writer, publisher, Artaud disciple, one-time psychiatric patient Carl Solomon (1928–1993), to whom Ginsberg dedicated *Howl*. Ginsberg met Solomon in the waiting room of Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in 1949. Sections of *Howl* directly refer to their time together in hospital (*Howl* makes use of the line ‘I’m with you in Rockland’ [Rockland being another name for Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital]), while sections of the poem make direct reference to some of Solomon’s youthful exploits, for example throwing food on City College of New York (CCNY) staff members: ‘[…] who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy’. See Allen Ginsberg, *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2009).
Through this approach, Halley stakes a ‘pained awareness of the impact of technological change’ on the respective cultural formations of Beat writing, Minimalism, New Wave art, and Robert Smithson’s work, respectively.55

‘Beat, Minimalism, New Wave, and Robert Smithson’ goes on to put forward Robert Smithson’s work as an example of a particular way art might respond to and reckon with the horrors of post-war American society. As Halley writes of statements made by Smithson shortly before his untimely death in 1973, ‘in his interviews of 1972, he came very close to codifying [a] strategy, based largely on “Marxian” ideas, for confronting the problems and illusions of Late Capitalism’, a strategy based on an ‘understanding that the work of artists is dialectical’.56 Halley then presents a more extensive quote from Smithson on the subject of this “dialectical” way of seeing art:

See, what I’m talking about are relationships. Art has tended to be viewed in terms of isolations, neutralization, separation, and this is encouraged. Art is supposed to be on some eternal plane, free from the experiences of the world […] I’m more interested in those experiences, not as a refutation of art, but as a part of the experience, or interwoven […] In other words, all these factors come into it.57

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55 As Halley notes, in Beat writing this ‘pained awareness’ also takes the form of the strange enmeshing of sexual fantasy, violence, and notions of ‘technological backfire’ in William S. Burroughs's writing. In the ‘frozen […] state of decisionless catatonia’ that Halley argues defines Minimalist art of the 1960s, and the ‘twitching hysteria’ of New Wave art of the early 1980s, Halley identifies opposite yet equivalent reactions to the vicissitudes of American social reality.
56 Halley, ‘Beat, Minimalist, New Wave and Robert Smithson’, 49
Smithson’s point gives us pause to consider the social stakes of what I have described as Halley’s postmodernist double-coded pastiche of past art. No doubt inspired by Smithson’s Marxian ideas, Halley’s work reacts against the dominant strain in the critical reception of post-war minimalist geometric art from the late 1950s and 1960s, interpretations that stem from Clement Greenberg’s ‘cognate praise of the avant-garde’s leap into abstraction, in order to maintain a world of absolute, self-legitimating value amid the degradations of kitsch and the barbarities of fascism and capitalism alike’, as literary scholar Steven Connor has described it.58 Against this, and in line with Smithson’s inherently dialectical statement that ‘things are not things in themselves’ but are ‘related to other things’, we can understand Halley’s earliest paintings as attempts to lay down correlations between forms of modernist abstraction and different ‘experiences of the world’.59

In the next essay I want to explore, ‘Painting at the End of History: Ross Bleckner’ (1982), Halley would significantly develop this line of thought. In this essay, published in the May 1982 edition of Arts magazine, Halley explored new paintings by fellow New York artist Ross Bleckner. For his third solo exhibition with Mary Boone Gallery in November 1981, Bleckner presented a series of paintings that appeared to quote seminal Op Art stripe paintings from the 1960s by British artist, Bridget Riley (Figure 1.43). Riley's 1960s paintings feature lines in various colours running either vertically or horizontally across an “all-over” canvas. Bleckner's paintings adopt Riley’s tight lines, yet the hardness, clarity, and almost machine-like precision of Riley’s work is

not maintained in Bleckner’s interpretation. In contrast, Bleckner’s line-work is looser, more expressionistic, and infused with cloudy hues of blue, purple, and yellow. Whereas Riley’s lines construct a hard, depthless facade, Bleckner’s lines waver and blur as they struggle to contain or hold back an eerie, diffuse kind of light emanating from deeper within the painting. The overall effect of Bleckner’s version is to both mirror and, somehow, diminish Riley’s original. While a work like The Forest (Figure 1.44) upholds the retinal orientation of its referent (Bleckner’s work still operates as a ‘generator of perceptual responses’ by way of ‘illusion and other optical devices’, as the curator of The Responsive Eye, William Seitz, said of Op Art in the press release announcing his seminal MoMa exhibition of 1964), the precision and sharpness of Riley’s painting is smudged or blunted.60 Bleckner, with a good dose of irony, returns Op Art to the hand and gesture, to emotive, subjective expression—in other words, to painting.61

Halley’s essay on Bleckner is, in truth, not particularly focused on Bleckner’s painting itself. Rather, it is Bleckner’s decision to return to 1960s Op Art that interests Halley. In particular, Bleckner’s work prompts Halley to meditate on the historicity of Op Art itself. This leads him to propose Op Art as marking a tipping point in the post-war development of American abstraction, the moment when abstraction fell from its avant-garde mantel and became complicit with aspects of mainstream American consumer culture:

Op art is chosen [by Bleckner] as a telling symbol for […] the transformation of the technological, formalist imperatives

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advanced by the Bauhaus into the ruthless modernity preached and practiced by the post-war American corporation, of the transformation of the aesthetic of Mies and Gropius into the Hula Hoop, the Cadillac tailfin, into Tang and Op Art. How and why did this occur? How could it come to pass, for example, that Josef Albers was selected by the Coca-Cola Company as a consultant in deciding which shade of red should be used in the Coca-Cola logo?"62

Abstraction’s loss of autonomy *qua* mass production and consumer culture is read by Halley as a signal of the much wider subsumption of life into market driven reality that took place in the 1950s and early 1960s. The transvaluation of everyday life by rapacious economic forces resulted in an entirely new set of messages becoming normalised at this moment in history, messages such as

- technocratic values were modern values; that the consumer should disregard his or her traditional values about what food, clothing, or enjoyment might be, so that the company could provide him or her with a more cost-efficient and hence profitable alternative; that communities should abandon traditional customs, modes of production and social organisations so that the corporation could transform society according to its own needs in order to most effectively exploit natural resources and create new markets.

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These messages form the ideological basis of what Halley describes as the ‘Golden Age of American expansion’. And yet, the suggestion that Op Art is yoked to this putative “golden age” gives Halley pause to consider how the relentless and aggressive model of post-war mass production came to a grinding halt during the early 1970s, in so doing shattering America’s once pristine narrative of post-war economic development. In this way, Bleckner’s work inspires Halley to lay out a two-part periodisation of American history that, as I will show, can be considered critical for Halley’s own painting.

Halley identifies a period from 1945 until the mid 1960s dominated by a corporate, technocratic impulse that undergirds the post-war hegemony of American economic and cultural power. Yet, as he observes, this all took place ‘before it became apparent that the bubble of modern progress might burst, before Vietnam [or at least the disastrous culmination of that war in the late 1960s and early 1970s], before 1968, before O.P.E.C.’ What we have in this two-part periodisation of post-war history is the idea of the 1960s as a crucial transitional moment between the post-war hegemony of America and a period of economic, social and cultural exhaustion resulting from the breakdown of the American economy from the late-1960s onwards.

The anachronism of Bleckner’s return to Op Art (here was a young artist in early 1980s New York making paintings in the idiom of early-1960s art) reflects another central point of this essay: the idea that, for a generation of artists working in New York

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in the early 1980s, the ‘golden age of American expansion’, particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, before the decay set in, were seen as being of great personal importance. As Halley makes clear:

For a generation of artists today, those years when American power was reaching its apogee have a specific meaning. The American dream was the reality of their adolescence. To explore its meaning, to relive its syntax, has psychological as well as sociological meaning for them [...] [New Wave] artists like David Salle and Steve Keister and musical groups such as the B-52s and the Modern Lovers also express in their work a need to relive and make art out of the sociology of the mid-'60s. Bleckner recounts as well that for him, as an adolescent, Op Art was what he knew modern art to be.65

Thus Halley locates a generational impulse at work in Bleckner’s stripe paintings, a need to return to and reckon with an apparently halcyon moment in American post-war history.

This final point reflects a larger impulse running through ‘Painting at the End of History: Ross Bleckner’, as well as ‘Beat, Minimalism, New Wave and Robert Smithson’. Both of these early essays attempt to draw attention to connections between art and post-war history in America. In this sense, we can consider these essays to refract the perspectival orientation of Halley’s painting, as explored earlier in this chapter. If the linear perspective repeated in all of Halley’s canvases invoked the “surveyor space” of classical art and architecture, in doing so positioning the viewer at a vantage point to

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inspect or audit a pictorial scene, then the approach taken in Halley’s early essays in a way reconstitutes that perspective as a historical, rather pictorial, vantage point. Holding this kind of orientation to history in mind, I want to now turn to the third and final essay I will explore in this chapter: Halley’s most widely read text, ‘The Crisis in Geometry’ (1984). Not only does this essay consolidate the above themes of historical survey, capitalist power, urban space, and technology, it does so in a way that—at last—illuminates a set of dialectical meanings for the three core motifs already introduced in this chapter.

‘The Crisis in Geometry’ is a text closely yoked to the late-1970s theoretical work of Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard.\(^6\) Regarding the influence of Foucault, sometime in 1981, after he had already started painting prisons, Halley read Foucault’s 1977 book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Drawing influence from Foucault’s book, Halley’s essay meditates on possible connections between Foucault’s analysis of ways in which industrial-era urban space is structured around the need to rationally manage the movement or flow of human bodies circulating through it as part of the everyday grind of industrial life, and the putatively neutral forms of Modernist abstract geometric art:

\[^6\] Halley states that he read Foucault’s *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) in 1981 as a reaction to the prison motifs that he had begun to include in his painting. See Leddy, ‘Oral History Interview’. With regard to Baudrillard, Halley came to hear of his work after a visit to the studio of Barbara Kruger in 1983. Introduced by Ross Bleckner, during his visit Kruger apparently described Baudrillard as ‘very interesting’ and a ‘working-class philosopher’. Halley then read *Simulations*, which had been published by Semiotext(e) in 1983, and began to cite Baudrillard in his written work from 1983 onwards. Halley has described himself as having a ‘rocky relationship’ with Baudrillard. For example, when Halley had his first European exhibition in 1986 at Daniel Templon Gallery, Paris, Templon invited Baudrillard to join them at dinner. As Halley recalls of that meeting: ‘he wasn’t very receptive to my use of his work, in my writing. He said something to the effect of, "Simulations is a precious jewel and should not be touched by anyone else"’. See Leddy, ‘Oral History Interview’.
With the birth of the industrial order [...] rigid supervision of time and activity was suddenly adopted by the social body as a whole. Here, then, is an analysis by which the modern obsession with geometry (an obsession that any person living in the industrial world can confirm by simply stepping outside and looking around) is reinterpreted.67

As Halley points out, Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish* that aspects of many modern cities had been designed after another type of city, a ‘short-lived, artificial city’, built and reshaped at will: the military camp. ‘For a long time’, writes Foucault, ‘this model of the camp or at least its underlying principle was found in urban development, in the construction of working-class housing estates, hospitals, asylums, prisons, schools’.68

The innovation of ‘The Crisis in Geometry’ comes when Halley associates the minimalist square with the carceral order of industrial-era urban space, as described by Foucault.69 Halley’s subsequent attempt to use ‘Foucauldian critique as the basis for a reinterpretation of the geometric art of the last two decades’ results in an intervention upon ‘the curious claim that geometry constituted neutral form, which was advanced by Minimalism and ‘60s formalism’.70 By arguing that it ‘no longer seems possible to accept geometric form as [...] transcendental order [or] detached signifier’, Halley relocates the hard, precise, block-like geometry of geometric abstraction in the real world, amongst the built forms of the modern city.71 In doing so, he builds a chain of association that

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69 Halley, ‘The Crisis in Geometry’, 93
70 Halley, ‘The Crisis in Geometry’, 94
71 Halley, ‘The Crisis in Geometry’, 91. Evidenced by the citation of the work of a number of Minimalist and Post-Minimalists in ‘The Crisis in Geometry’, Halley’s interpretation of the minimalist square is a clear response to the influence of Foucault’s work on an earlier generation of New York artists. Halley’s essay explains how artists such as
links formalist emblems, such as the minimalist square, with what he described as the ‘omnipresent unfolding of geometric structures in cities, factories, and schools, in housing, transportation, and hospitals’, in other words: ‘the great geometric orderings of industrial society’.  

If Foucault was cited in this essay in order to construct a critical image of the carceral or coercive logic of industrial urban space, Baudrillard is invoked to describe the fully networked logic of post-industrial social space. Halley’s essay features repeated references to ‘soft geometries’ or ‘seductive geometries’ related to technologies such as ‘computers, and electronic entertainment’. In this way, Halley’s associates his conduits, and the linkages and connections they establish with cell and prison motifs, with the kind of cyberneticised technological vision of post-industrial society expressed in Baudrillard’s writing of the late 1970s. Crucially, I think, Halley hints at the deleterious impact of these new technologies and communicational systems. Under their influence, any stable sense of reality is ceded to a kind of simulated virtual mode of reality, or what Baudrillard called the “hypereality”.

Robert Morris and Robert Smithson challenged the self-reflexive or self-contained paradigm of formalist art in the 1960s and 1970s by suggesting links between paradigmatic minimalist forms and certain carceral social structures. Halley specifically mentions Morris’ In the Realm of the Carceral (1978), in his essay, a series of twelve bold, sharply delineated, geometrically austere black ink drawings of various details of prison architectures. Morris had read Discipline in Punishment upon its publication in 1977 and was responding to Foucault’s work by way of another reference: to Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s Carceri d’Invenzione (1745–1760), a well-known etching series depicting the dark, maze-like interiors of imagined prisons. As Halley writes of Morris’ drawings: ‘in these works, an exquisite mechanical line is used to depict a denatured environment of total confinement and perfect discipline’. See Halley, ‘The Crisis in Geometry’. Regarding Smithson, Halley describes Smithson’s earthworks as a ‘confrontation’ between ‘idealist geometry and the actual geometries of the industrial landscape’. As Smithson continues, ‘Geometric configurations emblematic of the idealist tradition (circles, spirals, etc.) were branded almost arbitrarily on the ravaged industrial landscape’. See Halley, ‘The Crisis in Geometry’, 94–95. In an unpublished note contained within Halley’s archive dated the 26 August 1982, Halley describes his own project as an inversion of the logic of Smithson’s earthworks. As he writes: ‘In my work, I have reversed the process evident in Smithson’s. Whereas Smithson sought to overlay the iconography of rational idealism onto the entropic landscape of decayed industrialism, in my work I inject representations of industrial geometry (jail, parking lot, etc.) into a context of ideal, abstract art’. See Peter Halley, unpublished archive note, (1982).  

72 Halley, ‘The Crisis in Geometry’, 92  
74 Hyperreality is a concept from Jean Baudrillard’s 1970s writing. It indicates a moment in advanced technological societies in which reality becomes subsumed into simulations of reality, such as those generated by reproductive and
explore the question of Halley’s attempt to represent the semantic delirium of this hypereality further in Chapter Three, I want to now draw out some of the key implications of Halley’s essays, in particular paying attention to the question of periodisation at work in his core motifs.

1.5 Periodising Halley’s Iconography

Halley’s citations of Foucault and Baudrillard in ‘The Crisis in Geometry’ captured the imagination of audiences in the New York art worlds, then at the peak of its fascination with French theory. But, as Alison Pearlman observes, correctly I think, critics who ‘reflexively latched on to the trendy, theoretical references in this essay […] absorbed them uncritically’, in doing so missing the main import of the essay: Halley’s historicised or periodised concern with social forms. In an interview published the year after ‘The Crisis in Geometry’, Halley reiterated the understanding of form at work in his core motifs:

I see my work over the last few years as being about working through a change in the way geometry functions socially, from an industrial type of geometry to a post-industrial type. I started with a situation of coercive geometry symbolized by the jail. Then I moved to a more seductive geometry, symbolized in the Day-glo

communicative technologies, advanced computers, or networked media forms. For Baudrillard, this means ‘the collapse of reality into hyperrealism, in the minute duplication of the real, preferably on the basis of another reproductive medium-advertising, photo, etc. From medium to medium the real is volatilized: it becomes an allegory of death, but it is reinforced by its very destruction; it becomes the real for the real, fetish of the lost object-no longer object of representation, but ecstasy of denegation and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal’. See Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philp Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 141–142.

75 Alison Pearlman, Unpacking Art of the 1980s (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 125
colors, the systems of conduits, and the sort of video game space that I think my painting has now. That corresponds to a movement from Foucault, who mostly talks about the coercive geometry of industrialism, to Baudrillard who is more interested in seductive geometry.\textsuperscript{76}

We can say, then, that Halley’s prisons, on the one hand, and his conduits and cells, on the other, are yoked to specific moment or periods in capitalist development. And this is an approach that has two important implications for the criticality of Halley’s work.

First, in linking the geometric form of his prison, conduit, and cell motifs to historically specific social structures, in particular urban architecture, built space, and urban network systems, Halley’s work takes on a kind of cartographic valence. Halley’s model of abstraction demonstrates a will to map, or register the features of the world around him. We can say, therefore, that there is an ambition to orientate viewers expressed in the formal logic of Halley’s core motifs, a desire to somehow visualise or ‘image’ the city. Halley’s reinscription of minimalist geometric form therefore reveals him as a painter of the urban panorama—an artist registering, albeit in a highly abstract way, the different features of social space in which he found himself in New York.

Second, inasmuch as prisons are an attempt to describe the geometry of social space ordered by an \textit{industrial} logic, and conduits and cells describe the logic of social space in a \textit{post-industrial} moment, Halley places particular emphasis on the importance of periodisation in his painting. This is an emphasis, I would argue, that points to the fact that the early 1980s were a crucial historical inflection point in America. This was the

\textsuperscript{76} Siegel, ‘The Artist-Critic of the Eighties’. 
moment when the chaotic and disorientating waning of a once robust late-industrial mode of production finally exhausted itself, and just as an incipient post-industrial mode of production was coming fully into view behind it. We can, therefore, understand Halley’s motifs as something like attempts to see or map the contradictory historical impulses shaping this particular moment in New York.

The question of how to aesthetically map the historical dynamics of capitalism at this historical inflection point was a project on Fredric Jameson’s mind in the early 1980s, also. At a conference entitled *Marxism and the Interpretations of Culture*, held in the autumn of 1983 at the University of Illinois, Jameson presented a paper titled ‘Cognitive Mapping’ in which he speculated about the potential of new forms of political-aesthetic mapping, new aesthetic tools that might offer orientation during this period of widespread and significant social, economic, and political disorientation in America.77 For Jameson, this aesthetic project of cognitive mapping would serve as an ‘integral part of any socialist political project’, offering critical depictions of the social spaces and relations at hand in early-1980s America. As media theorist Douglas Kellner suggests in this useful summary of Jameson’s position on cognitive mapping:

> Individuals need some sort of image of mapping of their society and the world as a whole. “Cognitive mapping” involves the task of individuals, artists, and theorists, in providing orientation, a sense of time [history] and place through theoretical models of how

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77 ‘Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture’ was a major conference that followed a series of courses organised by the Unit for Criticism and Interpretative Theory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign over the summer of 1983. In 1988 presentations from the original event were included alongside new contributions in a major publication edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Contributors to this volume include Cornel West, Stuart Hall, Henri Lefebvre, Chantal Mouffe, Etienne Balibar, Ernesto Laclau, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Perry Anderson, Fredric Jameson, Fred Pfeil, Stanley Aronowitz, and Terry Eagleton, amongst others. See Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
society is structured, combined with historical analyses of stages of development.\(^78\)

While Jameson made clear that his proposal was speculative and did not refer to an existing corpus of aesthetic works (‘I am not even sure how to imagine the kind of art I want to propose here’, as he claimed at the very start of his presentation, in doing so suggesting that the aesthetic of cognitive mapping he had in mind was a matter of political necessity, something that \textit{needed} to be elaborated), I want to put forward the idea that we consider the model of abstract painting Halley had begun to elaborate in the years immediately preceding Jameson’s presentation, in particular the way in which his core motifs broke with the paradigm of formalism to depict abstract geometric forms as social structures, to share the kind of ambition expressed in the idea of an aesthetic of cognitive mapping Jameson was attempting to elaborate in 1983. That is, exploiting the terms of an emerging postmodernist aesthetic—such as pastiche and double-coding—my claim is that Halley’s double-coded pastiche of past art was an aesthetic model driven by an equivalent will to map the forms, structures, and textures of the social reality in which he was located in the early 1980s.

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I began this chapter by tracing the movement from intuition to visualisation that resulted in the birth of a weird and interesting, deeply referential, and highly coded kind

of abstract visual language in Halley’s art. I also explored how Halley developed a sophisticated way of integrating criticism and theory into his work, an approach that ruptured the self-containment and transcendence of the modernist tropes quoted in his painting, reinscribing them with new meanings, and transforming his painting into a site where socio-economic conditions are somehow rendered visible or legible. Holding these developments in mind, and returning to the question of painting’s viability as a critical model for art raised by the 1981 dialogue between Lawson and Crimp, I would argue it is not unreasonable to claim that, working away in his East Village studio in the early years of the decade, Halley was mapping out a new set of critical possibilities for painting, a new postmodernist way of *thinking through painting*.

Looking ahead to Chapters Two and Three, as I hope this chapter has now made clear, Halley’s work is defined by a kind of historical, material, and semiotic intricacy or complexity. The painting practice Halley developed in the early 1980s is full of congealed references and meanings, full of double coded games and intertextual plays on meaning. What I would like to propose, then, is the necessity of a rigorous approach to reading these paintings—something I attempt in Chapters Two and Three. The question I pursue in these chapters regards whether Halley’s subsequent painting practice lives up to the ideas he had broken through to in his first few years back in New York, and then elaborated upon in the essays between 1981 and 1984. If Halley’s core motifs can be linked to opposite historical terms in a contemporary historical dilemma unfolding in early 1980s America, to what extent do these motifs in particular, and Halley’s paintings in general, tell us something *meaningful* about the experience the respective terms in this dilemma, as well as the experience of their contradictory
relationship in 1980s New York? I begin to answer to these questions in the next chapter by connecting Halley’s paintings of prison buildings to a sense of foreclosure and exhaustion prevailing in early-1980s New York.


Figure 1.6. Philip Guston (1969). *The Studio*. Oil on canvas, 180 × 186cm. Private Collection. [https://www.artsy.net/artwork/philip-guston-the-studio](https://www.artsy.net/artwork/philip-guston-the-studio)


Figure 1.18. Philip Guston (1977). *Bug on Wall*. Oil on canvas, 74 x 116cm. Private Collection. [https://www.vip-hauserwirth.com/works/gusto110515/](https://www.vip-hauserwirth.com/works/gusto110515/)


Figure 1.23. 128 East Seventh Street. Collection: Peter Halley, New York City. Michael I. Danoff, Peter Halley: Paintings 1989–1992, exhibition catalogue, Des Moines Art Centre, Des Moines, IA.


Figure 1.27. Barnett Newman (1946). *Moment*. Oil on canvas, 76 x 40 cm. Collection: Tate Modern, London. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/newman-moment-t05501

Figure 1.30. Lowell Nesbitt (1965). *IBM #729*. Oil on canvas, 203 x 152 cm. Private Collection, New York City. https://catalogue.swanngalleries.com/Lots/auction-lot/LOWELL-NESBITT-IBM-729?saleno=2572&lotNo=305&refNo=779657

Figure 1.32. Francis Picabia (1916–1917). Prostitution Universelle (Universal Prostitution). Black ink, tempera and metallic paint on cardboard, 29 x 37 cm. Collection: Yale University Museum of Art. https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/33972.

Figure 1.34. Caravaggio (c.1593). *Boy with Basket of Fruit*. Oil on canvas, 70 x 67cm. Collection: Galeria Borghese, Rome. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boy_with_a_Basket_of_Fruit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boy_with_a_Basket_of_Fruit)


Figure 1.37. Jackson Pollock (1949). *Number 34*. Oil and enamel on white paperboard mounted on Masonite, 55 × 77cm. Collection Tate Modern, London. [https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jackson-pollock-number-34](https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jackson-pollock-number-34)

Figure 1.39. Frank Stella (1965). Bampur. Acrylic and Day-glo on canvas, 274 x 210cm. Collection: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles. https://collections.lacma.org/node/238336
Figure 1.40. Kenneth Noland (1970). Another Line. Acrylic on canvas, 166.7 x 289.6cm. Collection: Tate Modern, London. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/noland-another-line-t01686

Figure 1.42. Donald Judd (1970). *Untitled*. Copper, enamel and aluminium, 91 x 155 x 178 cm. Collection Tate Modern, London. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/judd-untitled-t06524

Figure 1.43. Bridget Riley (1964). *Horizontal Vibration*. Emulsion on board, 44.5 x 141cm. Private Collection. https://ocula.com/art-galleries/spruth-magers/artworks/bridget-riley/horizontal-vibration/
Figure 1.44. Ross Bleckner (1980). *The Forest*. Oil and wax on canvas, 304.8 x 243.8cm. Private Collection. https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/The-Forest/AFBCBF2D0E01D559/
CHAPTER TWO


*Freudian Painting* (1981) (Figure 2.1) features two freestanding prison motifs—one large, the other small—set against a background of unprimed canvas. Both prisons are painted in white acrylic mixed with Roll-a-Tex and feature barred prison windows crisply rendered in lines of black acrylic laid down using masking tape. The general sensibility or presence of these prisons, and the painting as a whole, pushes back against the idea of abstract painting as an expressive or emotive medium. Any trace or aura of craft, inventiveness, or manual mastery has been purged. Instead, *Freudian Painting* appears ‘stamped out’, as if made by some factory machine. Blank, harsh, forceful—this is a painting in which hard edges and sharp lines combine with stretches of numbing, empty space to produce a surface that refuses detailed consideration, in a way blocking or denying our gaze. Even our bodies seem to be forced away, repelled by the relief-like thickness of the crenulated white Roll-a-Tex surface of the prisons and the canvas’s heayset 3.5-inch stretchers—both of which push the painting away from the wall, into the space of the gallery, the space of the viewer. Both its orientation, and the positioning of the two prison buildings along the lower rung, or ‘horizon line’, of the canvas’s sizeable stretcher, suggest that *Freudian Painting* is a kind of landscape painting. But if this is a landscape we are looking upon, it is a brutal, cold, denuded kind of landscape. The lack of formal complexity, repetitive
geometry and relentless planarity of this painting, in tandem with the obvious carceral symbolism of its prison motifs, results in an abstracted vision of a chilling, dehumanised kind of space.

But to what extent is *Freudian Painting* a meaningful representation of a real landscape? Consulting Halley’s interviews we find numerous references to connections between his earliest works, those made shortly after moving to the East Village in 1980, and the built landscape of New York. As Halley told Trevor Fairbrother in 1988, upon his return to the city he felt the ‘paramount issue’ in his painting was the problem of how to ‘come to terms with the alienation, the isolation, but also the stimulation engendered by this huge urban environment’.¹ And, speaking to Tom McGlynn in 2018, Halley explained that ‘landing in downtown New York, I suddenly understood that my obsession with geometry was coming from this complex built environment, from the way the spaces around me were organised’.²

The image of New York generated in Halley’s early-1980s paintings is one I find to be indelibly marked by the deep economic, social, and political crisis that so radically reshaped the city in the late 1970s and early 1980s. New York’s gradual economic decline from the late 1960s onwards was due to a range of contributing factors. As historian Benjamin Holtzman observes, ‘ageing housing, unstable municipal budgets, a declining industrial economic base, [and] rising welfare rolls’ meant ‘the city was facing an uncertain and troubling future’ as it entered the 1970s.³ By the time Halley returned to New York a decade later, a barrage of policies and measures implemented to reform

¹ Fairbrother, ‘Interview’.
social spending in the city and stimulate new forms of post-industrial economic growth had only exacerbated these problems (these included a withering program of state-sanctioned austerity, a public sector wage freeze, widespread employee lay-offs, and an increase in the cost of transportation). As one of the keenest observers of this troubled period in the city’s history, Marxist philosopher and writer Marshall Berman, noted in 1981, the year Halley began painting prisons in his East 7th Street studio, ‘among the many images and symbols that New York has contributed to modern culture, one of the most striking in recent years has been an image of modern ruin and devastation’.⁴

The consequences of this period of sustained crisis in the city were widespread and deeply felt, leading to a profound, permanent transformation in the way New York operated. Above all, the multitude of problems facing New York signalled the final breakdown of the late-industrial, Fordist, liberal, and progressive social vision that had been established in the city during the post-war economic boom years. As historian Kim Philips-Fein observes, this moment led to ‘a set of social hopes, a vision of what the city could be’ being discarded and the cloaking of New York in a ‘political mood of bleak hopelessness’.⁵ Its golden age over, the city would have to operate differently in the future. From this perspective, the early 1980s can be understood as a moment of profound and disorientating historical reckoning in New York—the moment the exhaustion of a once robust late-industrial city became evident for all to see; a fact writ

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⁵ Phillips-Fein, Fear City, 4.
large in the very fabric and materiality of the urban space in which Halley found himself when he returned in 1980.

Through a battery of historically orientated postmodernist procedures and interventions enacted through his deeply referential minimalist artistic vocabulary, I argue that Halley’s prison paintings can be understood as attempts to process or work through this moment of late-industrial exhaustion. By projecting the minimalist square back into the built environment of New York, I show how Halley transformed this putatively neutral or literal trope of geometric abstraction into an architectural emblem that stands both as a memento mori for New York’s post-war ‘lost future’, its recently expired ‘golden age’ of capitalist development and expansion, and as a practical deconstruction and ideological critique of the legacy architecture of this golden age, as imprinted on the city through processes of so called “urban renewal”.

While this chapter is largely occupied with exploring this memorial context, I take time to also explore how Halley deployed further tropes of minimalist abstraction in order to locate or situate the modernist architectural forms depicted in his painting firmly in his own present moment in the early-1980s. If a ‘mood of bleak hopelessness’ was indeed shrouding New York in the early 1980s, I explore this mood as a structure of feeling captured in Halley’s redeployment of minimalist approaches to planarity and colour.6 It is, then, as representations of a very real situation of economic crisis and

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6 Developed by Welsh Marxist writer and academic Raymond Williams, the concept of a ‘structure of feeling’ can be understood as a set of collective, socially held experiences that somehow mark the cultural expressions of specific places during a given period. In his essay, ‘The Welsh Industrial Novel’ (1979), Williams identifies in Welsh industrial writing of the 1920s ‘a specifically Welsh structure of feeling’ marked by a ‘pervasive sense of defeat’ resulting from the failure of the General Strike of 1926. In writing from this period, according to Williams, ‘the defeat becomes fused with the more general sadness of a ravaged, subordinated and depressed Wales’. With this concept, then, Williams instructively identifies how real historical events find their way into the form of subsequent cultural productions. See Raymond Williams, Materialism and Culture (London: Verso, 2005), 157–169.
urban decay—the death of an entire regime of accumulation—that I engage Halley’s early paintings, and works closely related to them, made between 1981 and 1985.

Throughout this chapter I attend to the diverse signifying strategies of Halley’s painting. I show how glimpsed parcels or fragments of urban form find their way into the paintings. I demonstrate, over and again, Halley’s nuanced and highly cultivated sensitivity to the semiotics of colour. I do extensive work with and upon the carceral symbolism of Halley’s barred prison window motif, reading it both through and beyond his intended framework for its interpretation put forward in his essays and interviews from this period. And I also unpack the unstable semiosis of Halley’s paintings. As explored in Chapter One, encountering Halley’s resolutely quotational and intertextual paintings demands that we hold in mind their basis in forms of post-war minimalist geometric art alongside their ambition to represent social forms, such as different kinds of architecture. As I demonstrate, the works I explore in this chapter operate by way of a specific postmodernist analytic method of descent. What we might call ‘urban effects’—types of building, the layout of built landscapes, specific urban textures or surfaces, or evocative qualities of light and colour particular to New York—are inscribed in the painting using a deeply referential or intertextual vocabulary of “artistic effects” or “tropes” drawn from the lexicon of post-painterly and minimalist abstraction. This mediated inscription of the obdurate materiality of these urban effects can, I propose, help us grasp and understand some sense of the capitalist logic otherwise concealed or naturalised in the architectural forms and built landscape of Manhattan. In this way, Halley’s double coded pastiche of past art allows us to see and understand New York as a site radically shaped, both by design and historical accident, by developments in
post-war capitalism, as it lurched from its ‘golden-age’ in the decade immediately following World War Two, to the crisis years of the 1970s and early 1980s.

While I explore how this explicitly quotational postmodernist method offers opportunities to reflect upon the different ways in which Halley’s art critiques the social forces shaping this period of tumultuous historical change in New York City, I also demonstrate that this postmodernist procedure integrates a reciprocal project: the passing of judgement upon minimalist art itself. As I show, Halley’s prison paintings perform an elliptical postmodernist movement of critique in which the historical exhaustion of minimalist form—as already outlined, by the early-1980s the intellectual project for a transcendent, non-reflexive, self-contained model of formalist abstraction had been more or less abandoned—is exploited in order to cognitively map the exhaustion of industrial, modernist New York.

I want to now begin my analysis with an exploration of Halley’s general invocation of a kind of architectural materiality in his paintings. I will then introduce the history of urban renewal in New York, before exploring iconic aspects of the prison paintings, and a short-lived series of apartment paintings made in 1981, in terms of ways these works index the meaningful visual, or ‘concrete’, abstraction of social housing projects constructed in renewed areas of the Lower East Side. Following this I consider the carceral imagery of the prison paintings as an explicitly ‘anti-modern’ form of symbolism that can be linked to the reaction against urban renewal in the early-1960s, as exemplified by the work of Jane Jacobs. I then shift my attention to the 1980s, proposing that the flatness and washed-out colour of the prison paintings and related works capture something of the crisis and exhaustion permeating New York at
this time. I also raise some questions regarding Halley’s position on 1980s discourses regarding the gentrification of the Lower East Side. Drawing together the implications of these different readings, I explore how the various approaches to architectural depiction demonstrated in Halley’s painting ‘build up’ forms of representation with the capacity to reveal historically specific socio-economic conditions and power relations otherwise concealed or naturalised in high modernist urban architecture and built forms. Finally, I explore how the historical orientation of the prison paintings affirms the reflective, memorial aspects of postmodernist art.

2.1 Building Painting

*The Big Jail* (1981) (Figure 2.10) is a square canvas 183 x 183cm in size. At the centre of this square is a barred prison window emblem crisply rendered using careful taping and perfectly rolled on thin black lines of acrylic paint. The flattened out illusionistic space beyond these bars, ostensibly the interior of this ‘jail’, has been left bare, revealing the sandy, pale weave of raw canvas. Seemingly locked inside this jail is a solitary geometric figure—one of Halley’s Guston-esque pale pink triangular figures, the last time such a motif will appear in the painting. The intricate configuration of elements in the centre of the painting—the sharp black lines or bars, the raw canvas, and the strangely anthropomorphic pink triangle—sit in stark contrast to the rest of the painting: a wacky looking expanse of white acrylic modulated with Roll-a-Tex.

A work like *The Big Jail* exemplifies Halley’s tendency to treat both the surface and support of his paintings as sites of construction and building, in doing so invoking the general logic of architecture and built form. Central to this procedure is Halley’s use
of Roll-a-Tex (Figure 2.11). Roll-a-Tex is a textural additive produced by Zinsser, a sub-brand of Rust-Oleum: a large manufacturer of protective paints and coatings for commercial and domestic use based in the Midwest of America since 1921. Made from pumice and crystalline silica, Roll-a-Tex is designed to be mixed with paint and applied to walls or ceilings in order to cover over any small cracks, hidden tape joints, or previously patched up surfaces, as well as to, in the words of its manufacturer, ‘add a contemporary and attractive sand finish texture to walls and ceilings’ (Figure 2.12). Halley introduced this unorthodox commercial material into his painting earlier in 1981, in a work called *Little Spanish Prison*, and has used it consistently ever since.

As Halley has explained, he wanted to get away from the ‘painterliness’ of the wall paintings he had been working on just prior to *Little Spanish Prison*, and Roll-a-Tex seemed to offer a solution:

> There might be a wall going across the whole canvas and above that some sky. Or a wall and in front of that another wall. They almost looked like details from a de Chirico. The problem with these paintings was that there wasn’t any kind of radical approach to the materials [...] They were just pictures. Then a very quick series of changes started to occur in the work [...] Even though I wanted to continue to create pictorial things—more or less paintings—I wanted to find a much more radical means with which to paint these confining, walled-up spaces [...] It seemed really stupid to paint brick walls with a little brush and some acrylic paint. I needed to push the space of the paintings—to make them more low relief, to make the forms [...] sit on top of the background. I

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wanted to work mechanically; I was interested in the act of making, rather than painting. So I got the idea of using Roll-a-Tex, a material that I had seen all over suburban parts of New Orleans. It seemed to work in every way.\(^8\)

As this quote demonstrates, Roll-a-Tex operates as a kind of urban signifier in Halley’s painting; a material that allows him to build connections between the textural surface of his paintings and a range of urban surfaces one might encounter in a city, or its suburbs.

The use of Roll-a-Tex in *Little Spanish Prison* exemplifies this (Figure 2.13). In this work, Halley mixed Roll-a-Tex with a light-grey acrylic and painted a prison motif that sits flush with the bottom of this canvas. Though he would go on to use Roll-a-Tex mixed with Day-glo colours, here a light grey colour has been selected for optimal verisimilitude between the granular, concrete-grey surface created by the even application of the acrylic/additive mix and a whole range of ‘social surfaces’ available to the eye at every turn in the modern metropolis. ‘Concretised’ so, this painting not only projects itself back into urban space as something like its mimesis, it also moves towards the objectification of painting itself: the transformation of painting from a traditionally illusionistic pictorial surface, into an object or a thing—something ‘neither painting nor sculpture’, as Donald Judd described the ‘Specific Objects’ of his famous essay of 1965.\(^9\) In this way, Halley established a strange new register of illusionism in his painting, one that lent his work an odd kind of urban presence.

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\(^8\) Hixson, ‘Interview with Peter Halley’.

Halley’s use of Roll-a-Tex can be understood as pointing back to the history of recent abstraction in other ways, too. Roll-a-Tex is a nuanced, playful or parodic quotation of the tendency towards creating complex, textured surfaces in late-modernist abstract art. Indeed, Roll-a-Tex generates a quality of texture that could be drawn from one of Donald Judd’s relief paintings; an early work such as *Untitled (DSS 29)* (1962) (Figure 2.14), for example. This is an assemblage painting that features a scuffed asphalt pipe fixed between a thin box frame that sits in front of a crenulated, gobby surface. Like the frame, the surface behind the pipe has also been painted in vivid cadmium red, though here the oil paint has been mixed with wax and sand. As suggested by art historian Joshua Shannon, Judd likely built up this textured surface by pinching his thumb and forefinger in the wet surface to create the textured effect. We might also associate Halley’s use of Roll-a-Tex with the thick encaustic surfaces of Jasper Johns’ emblematic late-1950s paintings of flags, numbers and other ‘everyday emblems’ (Figure 2.15). There is a correspondence here, too, with the dense, built-up layers of white oil paint in an early 1960s painting by Robert Ryman, such as *Untitled* (1961) (Figure 2.16). What we encounter in Halley’s use of Roll-a-Tex, then, is a postmodernist adaptation that pushes these purely formal uses of painterly texture towards certain urban textures and surfaces.

Another way in which Halley’s paintings allude to built form is through their deep stretchers. Halley uses stretchers that are 3.5-inches in depth, an evident allusion to the thick stretcher bars of Frank Stella’s 1960s paintings. The depth of these stretchers

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10 Asked in 2018 by critic Tom McGlynn about the role humour and satire plays in his work, Halley responded: ‘I think, at heart, my work has a parodic element. Using Roll-a-Tex, for example, was a parody of painterly texture’. McGlynn, *The Brooklyn Rail*.

pushes the surface of the painting outwards and away from the wall, giving it a strange, architectural presence (Figure 2.17). As Halley has explained: ‘I always wanted the plane of the image to be separate from the plane of the wall. As if it’s in front of the wall, and not part of the wall’. Combined with his use of Roll-a-Tex, these stretchers transform the space of Halley’s paintings. What we encounter is more than a surface displaying an image. What we experience is a kind of built or constructed object.

In addition to his experimental and playful treatment of surface and support conjuring up the general sensibility of architectural forms, Halley’s commitment to an iconography of austere square or block-like geometry seems to establish a more specific set of architectural connections between his paintings and the clarity, symmetry, and uniformity of the type of modernist architecture preferred in urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s, as I will now explore.

2.2 Mapping Urban Renewal

Given the analysis of Halley’s prison motifs put forward in Chapter One via our reading of ‘The Crisis in Geometry’ (1984), we can say that the architectural forms Halley had in mind when devising these iconographic elements were linked, in some way, to the question of how industrial necessity shapes and determines urban space. What is less obvious, given the reductive or simplified nature of these motifs, is what kind of architectural forms in New York’s built landscape are being depicted in these imposing works?

12 Halley, ‘Lost Transmissions’.
One possibility is that what is being represented in these early paintings is New York’s 19th-century industrial-era architecture. The interest in Foucault’s analysis of the impact of the 19th-century factory system on urban planning and architectural design expressed in ‘The Crisis in Geometry’ would appear to encourage this interpretation. However, any reading that associates Halley’s work with 19th-century industrial-era architecture would appear to throw up a problem in the form of a historical or chronological disjunction. As he has made clear in interviews, Halley considers his work to be a meditation on post-war society and culture. And, as we have seen from his essays, Halley’s historical reference points are almost always oriented towards the post-war era, in particular the 1950s and 1960s—something that is also demonstrated in his interest in forms of minimalist geometric abstraction from this period; his concern with the minimalist square, for example.

Though we cannot discount the impact of Manhattan’s industrial-era, 19th-century architecture and urban plan (whether the vast grid-iron laid out in the Commissioner’s plan of 1811, or the tenement blocks and block-like loft architecture that appeared in Lower Manhattan in the 19th- and early 20th-century) on Halley’s overall sense or experience of New York as a carceral, enclosing kind of urban space, the particular interpretation I want to put forward concerns the possibility that Halley’s association of the minimalist square with the built space of Manhattan was a meditation not so much on the carceral logic of 19th-century urban forms, but a different kind of

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'It was very important for me in the early ’80s, and it continues to be important to me to avoid any pre-1945 influences'. See Hixson, ‘Interview’. This orientation also explains the relative lack of engagement with the abstract experiments with the original avant-garde in Halley’s early essays and interviews, also. Indeed the image of a politically deracinated abstract art that Halley’s project attempts to question or challenge is drawn wholly from developments in post-war American abstraction, and does not concern the political import of abstraction as it emerged earlier in 20th century in Europe.
enclosing or dominating industrial landscape, one that was created during the middle decades of the 20th century by urban renewal. And so, if in ‘The Crisis of Geometry’ Halley offers a model for a Foucauldian reading of urban space as a kind of industrial-era ‘iron cage’ with its roots in the 19th-century factory system, this is a model I want to now relocate and rehistoricise in order to generate an image of the modernist city that rose up in the post-war decades in New York.

Going back to the 1930s, urban planning in New York had been organised around principles adopted from the European modernism of Swiss architect and urbanist, Le Corbusier. These new ideas appeared to offer a scientifically rational solution to urban problems, such as overcrowding and disease, caused by unfettered urban development. As Shannon explains:

In his books, *The City of Tomorrow* and *When the Cathedrals Were White*, Le Corbusier had proposed the wholesale destruction of chaotic, dirty old cities such as Paris and New York. In their place would rise gleaming new cities of uniform towers, surrounded by parks and connected by ribbons of high-speed automobile expressways.

Through a comprehensive approach to planning and architectural design, Le Corbusier proposed that the transformation of inner-city areas shaped by early industrialisation would promote democracy and quality of life for urban inhabitants (Figure 2.2).

It was in America during the 1950s and 1960s, rather than his native Europe, that Le Corbusier’s ideas were most comprehensively realised. At this time, major American cities such as New York were thoroughly rethought by city officials, leading to new
zoning measures that divided the city into commercial, residential and manufacturing areas. This led to the extensive construction of new office blocks, social housing projects, roads, bridges and tunnels, as well as recreational and cultural facilities, such as playgrounds and concert halls (Figure 2.3).

In 1956, Halley’s parents moved to an apartment block on East 48th Street in Midtown Manhattan, an area that was, at the time, largely a low-rise residential neighbourhood. However, Midtown soon began to change into a commercial area, a development rapidly accelerated by the 1961 New York City Zoning Resolution, which designated Midtown as an area in which the construction of high-rise office towers was to be encouraged and incentivised. As Halley later described it, Midtown quickly became ‘full of office towers, with almost no nature,’ ‘just this huge, very abstract, very overscale, undifferentiated grid.'

Over a six-year period between 1958 and 1964, when Halley was between the age of five and twelve, no fewer than three major office blocks were constructed on lots immediate facing his apartment building. A block further south along 3rd avenue, just over the road from The Buchanan at 750 Third Avenue, was a 35 story glass and steel tower constructed in 1958, when Halley was five years old, by architects for Emery Roth & Sons. 750 Third Avenue is exemplary of the kind of mid-century corporate modernism that was popular in midtown at this time, with its various architectural set-backs forming a cascade effect while vertical cor-ten steel beams appear to dematerialise the buildings

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14 Hixson, ‘Interview’. Halley has directly implicated the 1961 New York City Zoning Resolution in his formative experiences of the city. As he explained in email correspondence with me: ‘In 1961, New York City changed the zoning of Midtown to encourage the construction of high-rise office buildings. Thus, from the age of 7, I experienced a complete transformation of my immediate physical environment. During my childhood, high-rise office were being constructed at a rapid pace, completely transforming the area.’ (Peter Halley, email conversation with Paul Pieroni, 28th November 2022).
mass as it rises up from 3rd avenue. To the north, beyond the public crossing at East 48th Street and Third Avenue, on the opposite side of the road to The Buchanan, was 777 Third Avenue. Designed by William Lescaze, this 38-story office building was constructed in 1963, when Halley was eleven years old, for the U.S. Plywood Company. Finally, directly across the road at 757 Third Avenue, is the 25 story Emery Roth building, another glass and steel construction that was opened a year later, in 1964, when Halley was twelve.

In the catalogue to his 1992 exhibition at Des Moines Art Centre, Halley described that his early life in Midtown ‘was like growing up in an airport because of the scale of the environment,’ concluding that ‘it had a very alienating feeling to it.’ What this appears to suggest is that these formative experiences in Midtown forged certain connections in Halley’s young mind between modernist architectural form, in this case the clarity, orthogonality and austerity of modernist office towers, and a particular sense of social isolation or alienation.

Now, while a more obvious approach would be to interpret and historicise the prison paintings in terms of this encounter with the modernist architecture of the Midtown Manhattan, and the feelings it evoked in Halley’s young mind, I want to suggest that we take this foundational experience of alienation by modernist architecture, expand it, and use it as a guide to explore the prison paintings in terms of the social logic and historical legacy of a different renewed landscape, one closer in Halley’s location in the East Village: the vast social housing projects built in and around the Lower East Side during the 1950s and 1960s.

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There are a number of reasons for this speculative relocation. First, in working with such a simplified, reductive, abstract visual language, Halley’s iconography has a kind of generic quality, an openness or availability, that enables us to expand his prison motifs towards a range of other modernist architectural contexts. The very lack of complexity or detail in Halley’s motifs, in this sense, allows us to indulge in a degree of creative misprision when attempting to identify real world architectural correlates for Halley’s motifs. Second, compared to Midtown, I think the question of social housing in Lower Manhattan offers a richer and more compelling historical context for exploring questions of alienation, isolation, control, dominance and coercion implicit in modernist architectural forms and urban planning. The postwar project to renew Manhattan encountered some of its most acute dilemmas in the social space of Lower Manhattan. By attending to these dilemmas through the creative misreading of the prison paintings, a new, hopefully illuminating context, can be brought these early works. And so, over the coming pages my attention will be focused on Lower Manhattan, in particular the Lower East Side, and the monumental housing projects that were constructed there in the immediate postwar decades.

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While local or city legislation passed in 1961 had fuelled the boom in office tower construction in Midtown, earlier legislation passed at a national rather that city level

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16 With this idea I am referencing the work of America critic, Howard Bloom. What Bloom called “misprision”, the deliberate misreading of a text, was a cornerstone of his model of literary influence. See Howard Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Howard Bloom, A Map of Misreading (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). It should be noted that the idea of misprision has obvious links to the processes of double-coding at work in Halley’s own misreading of minimalist artistic form.
known as the Housing Act of 1949, created an equivalent boom in the construction of Corbusian-inspired social housing in New York, particularly to the East of Lower Manhattan. As Shannon explains:

[...] Although the sheer scale of Le Corbusier’s plans meant that they were virtually impossible to adopt completely [...] in the United States, such a possibility was opened by Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, which appropriated $1 billion to initiate a national program of urban renewal, and which allowed governments, for the first time, to seize private property in order to offer it, below cost, to private developers [...] In New York City alone, $267 million had been spent on Title I housing reconstruction by 1957, twice as much as in all other American cities combined. Alongside this private development were the public projects of the New York City Housing Authority, which, by 1960, had completed fully a third of multiple-dwelling construction in the city since World War II—virtually all of it razing old brick and stone tenements in order to put up neo-Corbusian towers.¹⁷

Prior to the 1940s, the sites of these housing projects contained low-rise tenement housing, alongside stores, manufacturing lofts, small factories, and shopfront workshops. But between 1945 and 1965 the Eastern edge of Manhattan Island was completely transformed, these buildings demolished and, as Shannon observes, replaced with high-rise apartment houses (Figure 2.4).

In his extensive biography of the man behind these huge urban renewal projects, New York’s so-called “master builder” Robert Moses, author Robert Caro describes the appearance of the apartment houses running along the riverside of the East Village:

Northward from the bulge of Corlars Hook looms a long line of apartment houses devoid of splashes of color, hulking buildings, utilitarian, drab, unadorned, not block after block of them but mile after mile, appearing from across the East River like an endless wall of dull brick against the sky. Almost all of them—ninety-five looming over the river in the first two miles north of Corlars Hook—are public housing. They—and hundreds of similar structures huddled alongside the expressways or set in rows beside the Rockaway surf—contain 148,000 apartments and 555,000 tenants, a population that is in itself a city bigger than Minneapolis.  

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18 Robert Caro, ‘The Power Broker’ (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), 6–7. In his capacity as Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority Chairman, a role held alongside eleven others at one point, Robert Moses gained peculiarly broad mandate to remake the New York metropolitan region. Between the 1930s and 1960s, Moses presided over an era of sweeping reorganisation of the city. Centred on the premise that the city centre had become a congested, muddled site, Moses took a ruthless, destructive, and often unpopular approach to reorganising the city, in the process building, alongside vast housing projects, multiple expressways, seven major bridges, and other facilities, such as parks, play areas, sports courts and cultural centres. Halley’s father, Rudolph Halley, actually makes a number of appearances in Caro’s famous biography of Moses. Born in the South Bronx in 1913, Rudolph was a prominent lawyer turned politician who worked for the U.S. Senate Special Truman Committee investigating the national defence program and the U.S. Senate Special Kefauver Committee investigating crime in interstate commerce before becoming President of the New York City Council, between 1951 and 1953. At the same time he was also working in the media, narrating a crime drama television show on CBS called Gang Busters (1936–1957), hosting a documentary series, also on CBS, Crime Syndicated (1951–1953), and briefly writing a column for Hearst Newspapers. Described by Caro as ‘a liberal concerned with the social implications of government policies’, in his capacity as President of the New York City Council, in 1950 Rudolph began to question some of Moses policies and proposals. Caro recounts a luncheon meeting at the headquarters of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, Randall’s Island, attended by Moses, Rudolph, and Janice Halley, Rudolph’s wife and Peter’s mother. According to Janice, Moses’s patronising attitude to Rudolph’s concerns was ‘Oh, little boy, sit down. Father knows best.’ While Rudolph did not agree, his attempt to challenge Moses was inhibited by the acquiescence to Moses’s power expressed by most of his fellow New York City Council members. As Janice recalled to Caro: ‘It was a terribly frustrating period for Rudy […] He felt so strongly about things, [but] he couldn’t get anything done.’ See Robert Caro, ‘The Power Broker’ (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), 794. Rudolph died in 1956 aged just 43, leaving Peter – then aged just 3 – to be raised by his mother, and extended family.
Elsewhere Caro describes apartment houses as forming a ‘staggering panorama’ of ‘massed brick and mortar and iron and steel’, ‘civic […] edifices’ formed from buildings two or three hundred feet high (Figures 2.5–2.6). The extent to which the built environment of the eastern quarter of Manhattan was transformed in the post-war era by high-density housing is visible in aerial photography of the area. In one image, taken in recent years from a helicopter hovering somewhere over midtown Manhattan, the gentle bulge of Corlears Hook, an area running from the Manhattan Bridge past the Williamsburg Bridge and through to Midtown, features a mass of stubby, reddened blocks in a range of different heights (Figure 2.7). These buildings line the curving river’s edge, forming what Caro describes as ‘great groves’ of apartment houses that jump up from the lower-density, lower-rise, architectural landscape of more central areas in the Lower-East Side of Manhattan.

Some of the largest housing complexes in the city had been erected between the late 1940s and early 1960s not far from Halley’s East 7th Street studio (Figure 2.8). Just one block away from where Halley’s was living and working was Village View, a 1,236-unit apartment complex. Opened in 1964, it consists of seven buildings located between First Avenue and Avenue A, from East 2nd to East 6th Streets in the East Village. Three blocks further east along East 7th Street, lining the East River, are The Jacob Riis Houses, a housing project completed in 1949 and containing 1,191 apartments divided between thirteen buildings, each between six and fourteen stories, spanning two ‘superblocks’ from East 6th Street to East 13th Street. And to the north of the studio, on the very edge of the East Village, where Avenue A intersects with East 14th Street, is
the vast Stuyvesant Town-Peter Cooper Village residential complex: 110 red brick apartments buildings covering an eighty-acre site. The complex, opened in 1947, is divided into two parts: Stuyvesant Town, and Peter Cooper Village, and contains 11,250 apartments. As critical geographer David Harvey observed by way of a simple visual comparison in the opening pages of his *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), the layout of the last of these housing projects, the vast Stuyvesant Town, in many ways achieved what Le Corbusier had imagined when he drew up plans for a totally reimagined city centre in Paris in the 1920s (Figure 2.9).  

Halley was, therefore, in reasonably close proximity to some of the most prominent examples of the social architecture of urban renewal. And while there is no evidence to suggest that it is these buildings that are directly represented in Halley’s prison paintings of the mid-1980s, holding in mind the formative equation established during Halley’s Midtown upbringing (modernist forms equal isolation or alienation), I want to now establish some speculative critical connections between the prison paintings, and associated works, made between 1981 and 1985, and the built forms and spatial logic of these social housing projects.

2.2.1 Anti-Modernism

Central to urban renewal was the idea that the solution to many urban ills was to be found by geometrically *reordering* urban space. As demonstrated by statements such as ‘we strive for order, which can be achieved only by appealing to what is the

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fundamental basis on which our minds can work: geometry’, and ‘where the orthogonal is supreme, there we reach the height of civilisation’, Le Corbusier believed that adherence to modernist design principles—in particular what architecture theorist Dennis Crow describes as the ‘primacy of geometry for perception, cognition and building’—could itself lead to social improvement.20 This resulted in imposing, block-like architectural forms featuring limited ornamentation and built in serial arrangements over vast stretches of urban space becoming ubiquitous in renewal projects, such as the social housing projects built in lower Manhattan in the 1950s and 1960s.

Immediately after introducing prison forms into his painting in 1981, Halley began to make paintings that suggest or hint at the basic block and window format of social housing projects. Apartment House (1981) (Figure 2.18), for example, is a depiction of an apartment block made with great economy: just a simple grid pattern of taped up and painted black squares, five across, four down, punched through a blue-grey surface that stretches to the limit of the canvas’s edge to create an ‘all-over’, planar surface 155cm high and 168cm wide. This is one of four apartment paintings made over the course of 1981. The other works in this short-running series include Casa Cézanne (1981) (Figure 2.19), at 107 x 107cm a smaller painting of an ‘apartment block’ set against an unprimed canvas background; a second work called Apartment House (1981) (Figure 2.20), which takes place over two separate canvases and features two black apartment blocks, both with seemingly glowing fluorescent chartreuse windows, one of which is connected to a set of underground conduits; and, finally, Untitled (1981), a rectangular

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canvas featuring a Day-glo red apartment block with six windows marked out by unpainted zones of unprimed canvas (Figure 2.21).

Returning to the first Apartment House painting, it is tempting to read this work, in particular its sheer, uniform surface of square windows, in terms of statements Halley has made about the Midtown apartment building he grew up in:

The apartment building where I grew up was [...] a sixteen-storey building made of very dark brown brick with neo-Georgian detailing. It had this creepy threatening character, this huge Stalinist apartment block. [It was] a courtyard building, an open rectangle surrounded by other buildings. The apartment was tiny and whatever window you looked out of you saw brick walls and other windows. There was a sense of claustrophobia, without any sky or variation, which has really stuck with me.²¹

The apartment building Halley is describing here is at 160 East 48th Street (Figure 2.22). Built in 1928, Halley’s childhood home is a classic pre-war rental building comprising 16 storeys and 289 rental apartments. Constructed on the site of the former 19th-century Buchanan Farm, the building comprises five interconnected mid-rise towers which fold around a landscaped garden courtyard. Occupying the junction of East 48th Street and 3rd Avenue, the building is now known simply as ‘The Buchanan’. The facade of The Buchanan features a small number of architectural details at ground and first floor levels, including a decorated vaunted arch entrance. However, these

²¹ Hixson, ‘Interview with Peter Halley’.
details are limited. And, exactly as Halley describes, viewed as a whole The Buchanan presents as sequence of window uniformly dotted across otherwise featureless brick walls. A view approximate to the one described by Halley in this interview—from the inside of an apartment, looking out into the building’s courtyard—can be seen on contemporary real-estate documentation of a range of apartments available for lease in The Buchanan (Figure 2.23). There is indeed no sky, or, for that matter, any other urban feature, visible beyond The Buchanan’s sheer facades of red-brick, dotted in an orderly, intermittent way, with single or double picture windows.

I want to suggest that we take this experience of being enclosed or contained within an architectural space defined by relentless geometric uniformity and use it as a framework for understanding the critical impetus behind Halley’s later paintings of modernist architectural forms. Taken together with Halley’s experiences of Midtown’s imposing office blocks, we can see how highly ordered and regimented types of architectural space prompted a visceral reaction from Halley. And it is this same reaction that appears to compel a later set of architectural paintings made in late 1984 and early 1985.

In *Ideal City* (1984) (Figure 2.24), Halley reworked the format of inset squares first used in the apartment paintings. Measuring 160 x 183cm, nine small red Day-glo Roll-a-Tex squares sit within a larger Day-glo red square that features a slim channel leading out of the space containing the squares. *Ideal City* plays with our visual orientation (we now seem to be looking down at some vast city plan, occupying a bird’s-eye view, rather than the linear perspective otherwise used by Halley). In a variation on
this work from a few months later, we move from what appears to be a bird’s eye view of the layout of multiple buildings, to the internal space of an individual home. In *Ideal Home* (1985) (Figure 2.25), just a single Day-glo red Roll-a-Tex square now occupies a larger Day-glo red square. Again, just one ‘way out’ of this space is offered in the form of a channel to the left-hand side of the canvas. In one of the earliest write-ups of his work, as part of her review of *The New Capital* (1984)—a group exhibition organised by Collins and Milazzo at *White Columns* in December 1984—critic Beth Biegler wrote of how ‘a patch of Day-glo paint assuming the shape of a floor plan satirizes the ad copy vision of a "flat"—a spacious, bright and radiantly clean, antiseptic to the point of being anti-human’.22 *Apropos* Biegler’s reading, we might even imagine links between Halley’s depiction of this kind of ideal, antiseptic domestic space and actual adverts used to promote social housing projects such as Stuyvesant Town, which was just a few blocks from Halley’s studio (Figure 2.26).

Though a subtle aspect of these two paintings, I want to draw attention to the single channels of entry/exit depicted in *Ideal City* and *Ideal Home*. What these appear to suggest is an image of human movement shaped and controlled ‘by design’, and, accordingly, notions of ‘spaces of regimentation’ and the ‘control over social life’, discussed by Halley in his essay from the same time these two paintings were made: ‘The Crisis of Geometry’ (1984). One way of framing these tightly controlled pathways in and out of abstracted depictions of architectural spaces is as expressing a kind of ‘anti-modernist’ sentiment. And this is a sentiment that we can also identify in objections

raised against urban renewal in the 1960s by activists such as New York based author and urbanist, Jane Jacobs.\(^{23}\) The assumption that the inherent chaos of urban centres might be tamed through the rational, scientific planning of architecture and city space, an assumption that can be linked back as far as the ‘Haussmannisation’ of Paris in the 1860s (Figure 2.27) proved to be highly controversial in New York.\(^ {24}\) And by the 1960s, New Yorkers had become increasingly resistant to the austere geometric architectural vision for a reordered city promoted by advocates for renewal. As Jacobs wrote in 1961:

> We are constantly being told simple-minded lies about order in cities, talked down to in effect, assured that duplication represents order. It is the easiest thing in the world to seize hold of a few forms, give them a regimented regularity, and try to palm this off in the name of order. However, simple regularity and significant systems of functional order are seldom coincident in this world.\(^ {25}\)

Writing about Amalgamated Houses, a housing cooperative on New York’s Lower East Side, in her seminal critique of urban renewal, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Jacobs describes the hostile and coercive environment surrounding the cooperative’s buildings: ‘at the northern end of the project’s parklike central promenade,

\(^{23}\) We can consider Jacobs to be the pivotal figure in the reaction against Urban Renewal in New York. Her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was an early, clearly articulated and highly influential critique of the networks of planners, policy makers, financiers and media supporters responsible for renewal, which was experienced as the imposition of a destructive, paternalistic, urban order upon cohesive, long-standing communities. Instead of engaging residents in the renewal process, Jacobs argued that changes were implemented from above, with an air of bureaucratic or administrative intransigence that disrupted existing social bonds and economic patterns in already fragile urban communities, such as those in Lower Manhattan. See Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

\(^{24}\) Georges-Eugène Haussmann, otherwise known as Baron Haussmann, was a French official and administrator who, instructed by Emperor Napoleon III, undertook the large-scale urban renewal of Paris between 1853 and 1870. This included the construction of grand boulevards and wide avenues, new parks and squares, major public works, such as sewers and aqueducts, and decorative features, such as fountains. See Stephane Kirkland, *Paris Reborn: Napoleon II, Baron Haussmann, and the Quest to Build a Modern City* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2014).

an iron bar-gate has been permanently padlocked and is crowned not with mere metal netting but with a tangle of barbed wire’, adding ironically that ‘in the rebuilt city it takes a heap of fences to make a balanced neighbourhood’.  

Jacobs goes on to describe how renewal institutes the purposive division of space and the clear separation of different social groups and income classes in Lower Manhattan:

The “juncture” between two differently price-tagged populations, again in the rebuilt Lower East Side, that between middle-income cooperative Corlears Hook and Low Income Vladeck Houses, is especially elaborate. Corlears Hook buffers its turf against its next door neighbours with a wide parking lot running the full width of the super-block juncture, next a spindly hedge and a six-foot-high cyclone fence, next a completely fenced-in no man’s land some thirty feet wide consisting mainly of dirty blowing papers and deliberately inaccessible to anything else.  

In a strong comparison, we might link Jacobs’ vision of the ‘rebuilt city’ as a kind of ‘stockaded village’ with the works on paper from Robert Smithson’s Island Project (1970) (Figure 2.28), as discussed by Halley in ‘The Crisis in Geometry’. This is a comparison that, in turn, puts Jacobs into a curious dialogue with Michel Foucault on the subject of the vicissitudes of over-determined or excessively rationalised urban space. These intricate graphite drawings depict heavily armoured and weaponised island fortresses constructed from a range of ‘pure’ geometric forms. As Halley writes:

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Smithson’s late drawings depict hellish island environments, bristling with fortifications and littered with smoking and flaming instruments of death, most of which are formed out of simple geometric shapes like cones, cylinders, and cubes. In these works, Smithson comes closest to an explicit Foucaultian critique: the geometric monuments of the enlightenment tradition are transformed into instruments of sadomasochistic confinement and torture.\textsuperscript{28}

As Smithson observed elsewhere, he considered some of the ‘best sites’ for art to be ‘sites that have been devastated by […] reckless urbanisation’.\textsuperscript{29} It is at this very devastation that Jacobs’ anti-modernism is directed as she tracks the slippage of the ‘rebuilt city’ from Le Corbusier’s utopian vision of social improvement through purified geometry, to a dystopian reality in which social housing becomes a kind of prison.

The model of anti-modern critique exemplified by Jacobs’ scathing judgement of the architecture and ideology of urban renewal gives us pause to consider the prison paintings as related architectural paintings as being charged with a kind of anti-modern symbolism. In this interpretation, Halley’s iconic barred prison window motif becomes a symbol for a city that imprisons us, both individually—within constructed buildings as well as individual, rationally conceived spaces matched to our class certifications and income levels—and collectively, in cities modelled around an increasingly mechanical or robotic urbanism. This is an association affirmed by one of Halley’s early drawings, a

\textsuperscript{28} Halley, ‘The Crisis in Geometry’, 95.

small work on graph paper made using graphite, marker ink and correction fluid, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Titled Apartment House / Prison (1981) (Figure 2.29), on the left of the drawing, traced over the dense grid of a sheet of quad form graph paper, is a simple line drawing of an apartment house. Underneath, in neat, blocked capitals, Halley has written ‘APARTMENT HOUSE’. To the right-hand side of the drawing, the same drawing is repeated, with one key addition: each of the windows is barred up. And, underlining this below, Halley has penned ‘PRISON’.

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Let me take stock of the different procedures we have observed so far in this chapter. In addition to ‘constructing’ paintings in a manner suggestive of the general properties of built forms, Halley iconically depicted the serially ordered, modular modernist architecture of urban renewal, while also invoking a sense of coercion and carcerality implicit in the “rebuilt city”. Crucially, what facilitates each of these procedures is Halley’s quotation of the desubjectivised, blank, hardened, taciturn artistic language of minimalist abstraction. The minimalist artistic vocabulary of these works— their schematism, seriality, clarity, and austerity; their blank, forceful “plain power” (as Judd described his work)—has the effect of concentrating or intensifying the formal logic of modernist architecture in a way that reveals or betrays a social logic somehow at work within it.30 A work like Apartment House (1981), for example, is even more consistently square and devoid of features than the social housing blocks to which it

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30 Judd, ‘Specific Objects’, 181.
might be compared. Making full use of the aesthetic vocabulary of minimalist abstraction, this painting removes or detaches the aesthetic language of the architecture of urban renewal from its context and function. In this way, Halley’s paintings extract and render prominent something like the social essence of modernist architectural form, presenting its characteristically alienating properties in the form of an object of detached aesthetic contemplation, that is, as painting.

This is a procedure of aesthetic amplification or concentration that, I would argue, affords the viewer a certain kind of sensuous knowledge of the socio-economic conditions at work in the rebuilt city—a way to somehow see its social logic. One way to frame this procedure is in terms of Benjamin’s invocation of Brecht outlined in the introduction to this thesis. As you will recall, Benjamin put forward Brecht’s argument that in order to penetrate the abstracted or sensually unavailable appearances of capitalist reality—appearances in which the real, concrete conditions or power relations undergo a kind of fetishisation that masks or conceals them—artistic forms must develop methods of representation that go beyond realist forms of depiction; something must be ‘built up’ (aufbauen), in other words. By quoting past art in order to depict modernist architectural forms and the environment in which they are located, Halley’s model of abstraction appears to operate this way, building up and image of modernist architecture that allows us, if just fleetingly, to look beyond immediate appearances in order to glimpse the historically specific and determined power relations at work within it.

I want to now look beyond the kinds of iconic links I have just theorised in order to explore ways in which Halley’s sustained references to the architecture and urbanism of
renewal operate on a performative level, also. Halley adopts what we might call an ‘industrial facture’ in his painting, a modality of movement that expresses the gestural economy and temporal logic of industrial production. As I will now show, engaging this aspect of the painting offers a way of positioning the prison paintings as reflexive postmodernist critical reflections on the industrial logic undergirding in urban renewal.

2.2.2. Making Memory

As urban historian Themis Chronopoulos has observed regarding the basis of urban renewal, the rebuilt city looked less like an attempt to improve urban life, and more like an attempt to fully integrate urban space into a comprehensive late-industrial vision for New York. This was a vision with its roots in the ideas of efficient factory production adopted by Le Corbusier and introduced to cities like New York by acolytes of the Swiss architects’ vision, such as Robert Moses. As Chronopoulos proposes, the overarching orthogonality, formal austerity, and rezoning of rebuilt parts of New York expresses the integration of architecture and industrial production central to Le Corbusier’s modernism:

Le Corbusier believed that formal order in city planning was a precondition of efficiency. He advocated that the lessons of standardization and efficiency of Taylorism and Fordism be applied in city planning and building construction [...] In his city plans, he advocated a planned functional segregation so that areas for housing, work, shopping, entertainment, government,

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and monuments could all be separated. Le Corbusier also wanted to segregate different types of movement for the sake of efficiency […] Modernist urban design would meet the standards of “discipline, purpose, and order” so that unnecessary physical and human obstacles would no longer interrupt the processes of production and movement. The new planned cities would both aesthetically and functionally represent order in its most austere degree. People in such cities would always know their place whether they worked, stayed at home, consumed, or travelled because urban design would separate all of these activities spatially.32

In this way, urban renewal exemplifies the way in which Fordist ideas formulated to address efficiency in industrial production were extended to the city, its architecture and urban planning, as well being used to shape and determine the urban experience, and, indeed, the urban character of the city’s inhabitants.33 We can say, then, that there is a specific form of coercive capitalist power at work in landscapes reshaped by urban renewal: that of Fordist industrial production.

However expansive the social domination of Fordism may have been, the aspect of Fordist production I want to highlight here regards activities taking place inside

33 This aspect of Fordism was commented upon by Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci just two decades after Ford’s innovation. Writing in the 1930s from one of Mussolini’s prisons, Gramsci noted that with Fordism ‘new methods of work are inseparable from a specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life’, adding that the ‘American phenomenon’ of Fordism was capitalism’s ‘biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and of man’. See Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 302. As David Harvey also observes, ‘what was special about Ford (and what already separates Fordism from Taylorism), was his vision, his explicit recognition that mass production meant mass consumption, a new system of the reproduction of labour power, a new politics of labour control and management, a new aesthetic and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society’. See Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity, 125–126.
Fordist factories. As Karl Marx observed, the gradual integration of human labour into machine movement from the 18th century onwards led to intensive changes in industrial production. These changes saw the previous artisanal model of manufacturing—in which artisans and their apprentices were left to produce commodities according to their own, traditional standards using a set of unique and highly cultivated skills developed over many years of specialised training—superseded by the original division of labour of the early factories. With early 20th-century developments this process was significantly accelerated. First came “Taylorism”, or “scientific management”, which is described by David Harvey in the following terms:

F.W. Taylor’s The Principles of Scientific Management—an influential tract which described how labour productivity could be radically increased by breaking down each labour process into component motions and organizing fragmented work tasks according to rigorous standards of time and motion study – had [...] been published in 1911 [...] The separation between management, conception, control, and execution (and all that this meant in terms of hierarchical social relations and de-skilling within the labour process) was [by the early 20th century] already well under way.34

Then, in 1914, Detroit car-maker Henry Ford introduced a $5 working day at his Highland Park factory, much higher than the average salary at the time. This was as recompense for workers manning a new kind of mobile production line, one that brought

34 Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity, 125.
various parts directly to a stationary worker, established a year earlier in order to standardise activity as part of a broader streamlining that allowed for the mass production of Ford’s Model-T car. As Harvey observes, the implementation of the Fordist production line was impeded in the inter-war years by the dual obstacles of a labour force resistant to a production system that demanded long hours of deskill ed, routinised work, and a lack of support from state regulation bodies for a thorough overhaul of factory production systems. However, after World War Two, these labour and state intervention issues were resolved, bringing Fordism to maturity as what Harvey describes as ‘a fully fledged and distinctive regime of accumulation’ that ‘formed the basis for a long postwar boom that stayed broadly intact until 1973’.

And so, by the post-war era, with the comprehensive roll out of the Fordist factory system across America, the worker’s body entered a machinery of capitalist power that actively reshaped it to conform to a set of bodily motions, gestures, habits, and skills specific to whatever machine or tool they were handling on the production line. As film theorist Peter Wollen has analysed, the Fordist production line established ‘a hierarchy of standardised segmented and subsegmented parts, all interchangeable, plus a parallel hierarchy of machine tools (themselves made up from standardized parts) which both formed and assembled the parts’. These parts were then incorporated into ‘a continuous, sequential assembly line, with a tempo determined by time and work

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35 Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity, 129.
studies, which transferred the parts through the whole process, designed so that the worker never had to move, even to stoop to pick something up’. 36

Wollen’s account highlights one of the central contradictions of Fordist industrial capitalism: a tension between *subjectivity*, on the one hand, and the tendency of industrial production to *objectify* humans, mechanising their movement as part of the rationalisation of labour’s role or position within a production process, on the other. As David Gartman has argued:

> The main purpose of Fordist mass production was to turn human subjects into abstract, calculable, uniform things, mere objects in a totally rationalised system controlled by and for others. Workers experienced their work, including its timing and spacing, as an alien entity imposed on them from outside. And because at this time work was generally perceived as a testimony to the power and worth of the individual, such rationalized workers experienced their very selves as alienated, as fragments governed by alien others. Thus, the basic contradiction raised by such a work system was that between subject and object. Fordism posed these questions: can a human subject be rendered totally objective, abstract and alien to itself? 37

This is a dilemma that reveals much about the social logic of Fordism. And it is a dilemma that Halley instructively *thematises* in the performance of producing his paintings.

37 Gartman, ‘Postmodernism; or the Cultural Logic of Post-Fordism’, 123.
Making a painting is not a complicated process for Halley. Rather, it involves a set of basic, repetitive gestures that express something of the mechanisation of movement and deskilling of labour that defines industrial production line work.\textsuperscript{38} At the root of this, I would like to argue, is the crucial shift away from using brushes in his work, to using tape and rollers, that took place early in 1981. This resulted in a smoother, less differentiated painted surface. A painting like *Ideal City* (1984), for example, presents as an almost perfect surface of sharply delineated zones of different colour and texture. There are no obvious traces of a human hand at work on show. Rather, invoking Judd’s famous appeal in ‘Specific Objects’ (1965), this painting appears almost as if it has been ‘stamped out’, made by some kind of elaborate industrial machine, and not by human hands.\textsuperscript{39} As Halley explained to critic and editor Giancarlo Politi in 1990:

I don’t like to paint difficult things where one has to work out shading or something like that. I like to paint flat surfaces and I like to paint mechanically […] There’s something enjoyable about doing something simple, and in my case it’s pretty mechanical or without reflection.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} For a rigorous treatment of deskilling in art see John Roberts, *Intangibles of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2008).

\textsuperscript{39} Stamping, also known as pressing, is an industrial sheet-metal forming process. It involves placing sheet-metal, or a synthetic material like polystyrene, into a pressing machine that stamps the material into a given form with each downward motion. As Judd writes in ‘Specific Objects’: ‘almost nothing has been done with industrial techniques and, because of the cost, probably won’t be for some time. Art could be mass-produced, and possibilities otherwise unavailable, such as stamping, could be used’. See Donald Judd *Complete Writings 1959–1975*, ed. Kasper Koenig (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 187.

And yet, contra to this vision of an automated or instant moment of painting—the pressing of a button or the drawing down of a lever to generate the work—Halley’s paintings are incredibly labour and time intensive, as he explained in a 2017 lecture at the Garage Museum in Moscow:

These paintings are a great deal of work […] Not only the cells, but the conduits are built up with a great deal of paint. The bands are about 50 coats of paint. The reason they are straight is that you put paint on and you paint between the tape. And every four coats of paint the tape has to be removed, or otherwise you don’t get a clean edge.41

As this quote demonstrates, in the same way industrial labour constantly attempts to induce the worker into longer working hours, Halley’s paintings place excessive temporal demands on their maker by requiring constant attention over many days and weeks. What we have with Halley’s painting, then, is a two-fold performance that, on the one hand, reduces the act of painting to a set of basic, repetitive gestures, and, on the other hand, demands a vast amount of unskilled labour time. Both of these performative aspects seem to signal the logic of industrial production, casting it as a kind of aporia.

Halley has stated that he has ‘always been interested in the kind of abstraction in which the artist’s way of making the thing has a lot to do with it’.42 This being so, we can frame Halley’s turn towards a more automated, serial facture—the ‘mechanical

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41 ‘Peter Halley Public Talk at Garage Museum, Moscow’.
42 Politi, ‘Peter Halley Interview’.
decomposition’ of his painting—to be a reflexive expression of the kind of dehumanisation involved in the deskilling of labour on the Fordist production line. Halley’s facture thus serves a reflexive and critical purpose in his painting: to highlight the Fordist industrial production line as site where capital attempts to subjugate or objectify human life—a site, quite literally, of alienation.

And, once again, this is a procedure that exploits qualities particular to forms of late-1950s and 1960s art making. As Halley has himself suggested:

I am very much from the sixties school of making art that's descended from automatism. That's how I see Warhol or Kelly or Stella. They all come from Cage and random operations. Warhol has said that he used the square because he didn't have to decide which side was bigger. All sorts of people, like Stella, Noland, and Johns use colour out of the tube "because it was so much easier to do it that way," Johns said that he used stencilled numbers because that was just the way they came from the store. I like to use primaries, or black and grey, and squares, and if I have to put in a line I'll put it in the middle.⁴³

We might also identify this automated or mechanised approach to production in Halley’s commitment to using just a few motifs in a repetitive, serial manner. In a way, since the 1980s, Halley has been engaged in the “mass production” of just a few simple geometric motifs, generating hundreds, if not thousands of iterations of just a few forms. And while this kind of artistic seriality can be framed in purely formalist terms (for example in

⁴³ Cone, ‘Interview’.
Rosalind Krauss’ conception of the series as a way of working repetitively in order to make evident the logic of a chosen medium of expression), we can also frame automatism and serial artistic production as something like an unconscious mediation of art by late-industrial forms of production, in particular, Fordist mass production.44

It is this connection, between forms of minimalist art and mass production, that Hal Foster makes in his essay ‘The Crux of Minimalism’ (1986). As Foster observes, while serial production is characteristic of the form of advanced capitalist production, ‘not until minimalism and pop in serial production made consistently internal to the technical production of art’. For Foster, this incorporation suggests ‘the penetration of industrial modes into spheres that were once removed from them’.45 Yves-Alain Bois makes an equivalent argument regarding the minimised and mechanised facture of Robert Ryman’s work from this same period in his essay ‘Painting: The Task of Mourning’ (1986). While much modernist painting sought to resist the basic subject/object contradiction brought about by early industrialisation, Bois identifies a ‘submerged’ dimension in Robert Ryman’s ’60s painting: the desire to mechanically decompose Modernist painting’s emphasis on touch, texture, and gesture.46 This argument, which Bois traces back to Walter Benjamin’s work on mechanical reproduction, focuses on the appearance of photography, and of industrial mass production, in the late 19th Century—both of which were understood as ostensibly

causing ‘the end of painting’. Challenged by the mechanical apparatus of photography, and by mass-produced objects, painting had to redefine its status, to reclaim a specific domain. This domain, as Bois observes, would come to emphasise how the particularity of painting—again: touch, texture, gesture—became the means by which it was insulated from the mechanisation characteristic of industrial production. If ‘industrial capitalism banished the hand from the process of production, the work of painting alone as craft still implied manual handling. Artists were therefore compelled, by reaction, to demonstrate over and again the exceptional nature of their activity’. 47 In contrast to this, some one hundred years later, in the late-1950s and early 1960s, there begins a tendency in certain artworks to integrate aspects of industrial production, in doing so reacting against ‘theoretical demonstration of the historical position of painting as an exceptional realm of manual mastery’. 48 What emerges in the work of artists such as Robert Ryman and Frank Stella, therefore, is a break with emotive forms of expressive painting, and the cultivation of new ways of working that were attenuated by industrial and manufacturing protocols.

Now, while both Foster and Bois suggests that this kind of mechanical decomposition was a submerged characteristic of late-modernist painting, what Fredric Jameson might describe as a facet of the ‘political unconscious’ of late-1950s and 1960s minimalist abstraction, an under recognised dimension of its social mediation, I want to suggest that Halley’s postmodernist recuperation of the mechanical

decomposition of painting from this period makes the mediation of this model of painting by industrial mass production a conscious and explicit or reflexive dimension of his own paintings.49

It’s also worth noting that Halley performatively adopts the facture of mechanically decomposed art in order to produce somewhat dystopian images of architectural forms linked to the highly rationalised and technocratic social program at work in postwar industrial mass production in America. On the one hand, as I have shown, Halley mechanically depicts the blocky, machine-like architectural forms of urban renewal in his paintings. On the other hand, Halley took this move a step further when, between 1984 and 1987, he produced a number of paintings featuring a factory-like motif, works such as Blue Cell with Smokestack (1984), and Cell with Smokestack and Underground Conduit (1985) (Figures 2.38-2.39). In both cases, Halley produces paintings that collapse together iconic and performative references to an exhausted industrial paradigm, generating a layered, complex and illuminating abstract representation of the urban iconography of an expired mode of production.

By these means Halley’s work enacts a critically revealing postmodernist operation that both allows us to tangibly experience forms loaded with historical signifiers, while also suggesting ways in which these signifiers point to something lurking within industrial culture: namely, its subjugation and alienation of human life. In this way, through their iconography and facture, Halley’s prison paintings function as

critiques of Fordist instrumental rationality, exposing or deconstructing it to reveal its logic as ever-increasingly disenchanted, closed, and reified technocratic social order.\(^{50}\)

In casting judgment on Fordism in this way, the prison paintings fulfil what literary critic and theorist Linda Hutcheon frames as one of the key critical potentials of postmodernist art: the way it both ‘inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world’.\(^{51}\) As Hutcheon proposes, postmodernist strategies such as double-coding and pastiche function within cultural contexts ‘to point to the history and historical power’ at work in existing cultural and social forms, ‘contextualising both in such a way as to deconstruct them.’\(^{52}\)

But we can also say that Halley’s prison paintings advance a reciprocal critique of the established ‘literalist’ discourse of post-war formalist art in America. Indeed, we can understand the prison paintings to be a reflection not just on the type of urban space he was occupying in the early 1980s in New York, but also upon the model of historical art quoted in these paintings. In this sense, the self-contained semiosis of exemplary formalist abstractions, as framed in Greenberg’s dominant art-historical account, the explicit literalism and anti-social logic of most early-minimalist works, for example, is revealed to also be a kind of carceral structure—a kind of ‘prison of history’, to coin the title of the first prison painting Halley made—from which Halley is trying to

\(^{50}\) As philosopher Jay Bernstein has proposed of this aspect of subjugation by rationalisation: ‘in treating every object as in principle subject to means-ends ratioication and hence as indefinitely manipulatable, instrumental reason extirpates life from the world, or, perhaps, first brackets and then excludes the cognitive experience of perceiving, living beings like ourselves’ or, perhaps, finally, as our experience of the living becomes more ambiguous, what counts as experiencing the living is delegitimate’ (111). See Jay Bernstein, ‘The Horror of Nonidentity: Cindy Sherman’s Tragic Modernism’, in *From An Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2000) 107–144.


escape as a postmodernist artist. The prison paintings can be understood as attempts to ‘break out’ from the conceptual prison of understanding or judging minimalist geometric abstraction purely in formalist terms, in terms of the ‘enclosure’ of Greenbergian formalism. The prison paintings therefore have a kind of fugitive valence: these are paintings desperate to escape into a less determined, polysemous space in which a far greater range of social references become possible. These paintings, in short, that are trying to release themselves from art history.

While I have so far approached the prison paintings as retrospective or memorial works attempting to reckon with the problematic legacy and residual architectural or built presence of a late-industrial city, other aspects of Halley’s work seem to capture something of the ‘mood of bleak hopelessness’ in early-1980s New York. As I will now explore, through careful strategies of pictorial organisation and colouration, Halley returns the modernist architectural forms depicted in his paintings to his own present moment, a time of depression and decay in New York.

2.3 The 1980s

One way an atmosphere of quiet, brooding crisis and social exhaustion is captured in Halley’s painting from the early 1980s is through his uncomfortable method of forcing representational imagery into the ‘airless’ and superficial pictorial space pioneered by American abstract geometric painters of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, an obvious connection with this tradition or genre of abstraction can be made in terms of Halley’s commitment to, but subversion of, its governing planarity or flatness.
Returning to *Apartment House* (Figure 2.18), this painting ostensibly depicts an apartment building sitting on a ground plane. However, this is a depiction that is completely devoid of illusory depth or complexity. As just suggested, planarity—derived from the Latin *planus*, meaning flat—can be considered the *sine qua non* of the tradition of American abstract geometric painting so often quoted in Halley’s work. As Michael Auping has observed, planarity is one way to describe ‘the frontal, almost emblematic quality of much post-war American abstraction’.\(^53\) And as Ellsworth Kelly has noted of postwar geometric abstraction, ‘the problem with this type of art is not one of edge, line or geometry in a strict sense. If it can be described at all—and I think of Newman, myself and Stella, a lot of us—it’s planar: large, flat holistic planes’.\(^54\) Halley has recently said the following about the governing flatness of his work:

> A lot of people think my work is extremely old fashioned. As one example I’m still pretty much enamoured or interested in the idea of flatness. There is some figure-ground in my painting, but there isn’t much illusion and an avoidance of illusionistic space as in earlier modernism.\(^55\)

As we can see, while clearly in conflict with the dominant discourse concerning the autonomy of American abstract geometric painting, Halley’s paintings do maintain a (seemingly quintessentially American) commitment to flatness or planarity. While some instances of planarity in American post-war abstraction appear playful (Kelly’s flatness, for example, has a vertiginous quality expressed through forms turned about, volumes

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\(^{54}\) Auping, ‘Fields, Planes, Systems’, 23.

compressed) planarity seems to generate an odd and imposing kind of presence in Halley’s work.

Part of the power of Halley’s paintings lies in their odd insistence that an immediately recognisable object from the ‘real world’—a brick wall or an apartment building—can be contained, somehow, within a pictorial space defined by rigorous planarity. This generates a form of defamiliarised figuration or depiction in Halley’s paintings. *Apartment House*, for example, captures a completely flattened or thinned out architectural figure. Emaciated, pallid, lifeless—we seemingly encounter this building in a state of exhaustion. It is as if history has moved on from this particular structure, yet it remains before us as a kind of modernist relic: denatured, defeated—but somehow still here decades after the world-view that constructed it has expired.

Halley also exploits a range of chromatic effects inherited from past abstractions in his early-1980s paintings in order to capture something of the mood or atmosphere in New York at this time. Works like *Apartment House* and *Freudian Painting*, amongst other prison paintings from this period, combine lightless blue-grey or puce figures with unprimed canvas backgrounds in a way that seems to draw life out from the surface of the canvas. One particular washed out grey Halley repeatedly used in his work, beginning with the wall paintings, is especially effective as a kind of sensual deadener. This grey seems to capture the pallid colour of a mortar and steel landscape lit by a dull, depressive, migraine-inducing kind of light. Used in combination with unprimed canvas in a work like *Casa Cézanne* (1981), the result is a bleak, austere, and lifeless depiction of an architectural façade.
Halley’s use of unprimed canvas is similarly evocative (Figure 2.30). Again the presence of raw or unprimed canvas in Halley’s painting is a knowing quotation, one that calls to mind the prominent use of raw canvas in Helen Frankenthaler’s poured and stained abstractions (Figure 2.31), Kenneth Noland’s circle paintings (Figure 2.32), or Morris Lewis’ early poured paintings (Figure 2.33). Like achromatic colour, unprimed canvas helps generate a particular kind of mood in the painting. In *Freudian Painting* (1981), for example, a background of unprimed canvas lends the background space surrounding the two prison buildings in this painting a kind of emptiness or vacancy. This is an absence or lack that underlines the already grim, hardened austerity of this painting, only further enhancing its impact as a depiction of a troubled city.

While I focus my analysis of Halley’s use of Day-glo painting in the next chapter, I want to close this section by briefly exploring another aspect of Halley’s approach to using colour to capture the atmosphere and, indeed, the material conditions undergirding that atmosphere, in his paintings. Towards the middle of the decade Halley expanded the semiotic range of his use of colour by making a series of evidently night-like paintings. In *Prison with Yellow Background* (1984) (Figure 2.34), a gloomy architectural figure appears suffused with an eerie kind yellow light. One way of framing the light of this painting is as a representation of specific kind of street light technology. Commonplace in New York until very recently, when LED lighting supplanted it, high pressure sodium vapour street lighting, known as HPS lighting, bathes the street in an eerie, flat, orange-yellow light. Using “fluorescent chartreuse”, a Day-glo colour made by

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Golden Artist Colour, Inc., Halley illuminates the sky surrounding the prison motif in this painting, casting it in the same kind of oddly diffused, synthetic light sort of light generated by the type of sodium vapour discharge taking place in these lightbulbs.

By the late 1970s, HPS bulbs had become the preferred choice for street lighting in New York City, selected for being highly efficient as light sources, and therefore cost reductive. As writer Hal Espen notes of the ‘yellow glow [that] now colors the night and stains metropolitan horizons everywhere’, while mercury-vapour lamps (which emit a much cooler blue-yellow light) had been preferred up until the mid-1970s in cities like New York, ‘after the energy shocks of the 1970s, high-pressure sodium lights gradually took over in New York (high-pressure sodium lights consume half as much energy as mercury-vapor lamps and can last up to 16,000 hours longer, as a result the city embraced them).’

However, these gains in electrical efficiency and running costs register as significant losses in the quality of light emitted by HPS bulbs. HPS lighting offers a significantly reduced or impaired visual experience to the human eye when compared to incandescent (as well as halogen) bulbs. Indeed, HPS light negates or cancels out the colour of anything it lights, resulting in an eerie kind of monochromatism that drains away colour, flattening the lit object while suffusing it with a dull, orange-yellow hue (Figure 2.35). A work like Prison with Yellow Background seems to glow with this same

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57 Hal Espen, ‘The Light Fantastic’, The Atlantic, July/August 2022, accessed 22 March 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/07/the-light-fantastic/308545/. Whereas incandescent bulbs, the type of traditional lightbulbs still common in households today, waste a lot of energy (some 10 lumens per watt), HPS bulbs emit much more energy and offer a much more stable, consistent light source at 100–190 lumens per watt. The kind of HPS bulb used in New York street lighting has an average lifetime of around 24,000 hours, or five years, based on being operational twelve hours a day. HPS lamps have been shown to provide the greatest amount of photopic light in exchange for the lowest electrical input. See 'Lighting Comparison: LED vs high pressure sodium / low pressure sodium' Stouch Lighting (3 November 2016), accessed 4 April 2021, https://www.stouchlighting.com/blog/led-vs-hps-lps-high-and-low-pressure-sodium.
quality of light and colour. The peculiar, transfixing yellow glow of this painting captures an image of an urban landscape robbed of chromatic complexity by a light form that, in its economic efficiency, signals at one remove the economic tumult and fiscal crisis of New York in the 1970s and early 1980s.

It’s worth comparing Halley’s use of planarity and colour to capture, through a process of abstraction, aspects of the atmosphere of social breakdown and urban decay in early-1980s New York with the preponderance of realist images that otherwise define this moment in New York’s history. As philosophers Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle have observed, from ‘miserabilist class melodrama’ to so-called ‘ruin porn’ works, there is an 'aesthetics of urban crisis' that captures New York of the 1970s and 1980s in gritty images of ‘slum populations and vacant, rusting, rotting fixed capital, side by side’.

Consider, for example, Perla de Leon’s black and white photographic series ‘South Bronx Spirit’ (1980) (Figure 2.36). These gelatine silver photographic prints depict sparsely populated brick and rubble strewn streets of a New York neighbourhood devastated by economic change and lack of investment. Consider also the glut of cinematic works set amongst the urban decay of New York at this time. As Philips-Fein points out:

The classic cinema of the 1970s and 1980s memorialized these years of disinvestment and blight in films such as Taxi Driver, The Panic in Needle Park, The Taking of Pelham One Two Three, and Fort Apache, The Bronx (Figure 2.37), which portrayed New York as a sea of filth and despair, an urban cesspool.

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60 Philips-Fein, Fear City, para.10.
It’s interesting, I think, to contrast these striking realist and documentary representations of New York with Halley’s abstracted approach. In a way, what Halley’s complex representational method aims to get at or access is something beyond the kind of visible chaos and destruction captured in the ‘aesthetic[s] of urban crisis’ described by Toscano and Kinkle. Bypassing or piercing the superficial disorder of urban space in Lower Manhattan, Halley presents a sombre, melancholic, affectively charged image of a city in crisis. However apparently desubjectivised and affectless his minimalist works might appear, they actually offer us a way of feeling this era in New York—and in a way radically different to the kinds of image that otherwise represent this moment of crisis and exhaustion in the city.

It would be remiss of me, at this point, not to discuss a different crisis unfolding in Manhattan’s Lower East Side in the early 1980s. Looking at the timing of his emergence as an artist, and his location in the East Village, it’s necessary to implicate Halley in what art historians Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan described in an essay published in the Winter 1984 edition of October as the ‘hard social realities and complex political questions’ raised by the gentrification of the Lower East Side. While Halley moved to East Seventh Street before galleries such as Fun Gallery, 51X, Nature Morte, Civilian Warfare, and Gracie Mansion began opening between 1981 and 1982, his presence in the area is nonetheless a symptom of a gentrification process that sought to transform the Lower East Side from an established working class neighbourhood to

what critics excitedly labelled as Manhattan’s ‘third art district’—a new and electrifying destination to rival Uptown and Soho.⁶²

As Deutsche and Gendal Ryan make clear, this ‘representation of the Lower East Side as an “adventurous avant-garde setting” […] conceals a brutal reality’.⁶³

For the site of this brave new art scene is also a strategic urban arena where the city, financed by big capital, wages its war of position against an impoverished and increasingly isolated local population. The city’s strategy is twofold. The immediate aim is to dislodge a largely redundant working-class community by wrestling control of neighbourhood property and housing and turning it over to real-estate developers. The second step is to encourage the full-scale development of appropriate conditions to house and maintain late capitalism’s labor force, a professional white middle class groomed to serve the center of America’s “postindustrial” society.⁶⁴

Deutsche and Gendal Ryan propose that artists, alongside the dealers, critics and museum curators who created the East Village art scene, are complicit in this ‘war of position’ between the city and the long established working class community in the Lower East Side. ‘Enmeshed’ in mechanisms of gentrification, galleries and studio

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based artists stand accused of driving up rents and displacing the poor—‘residents who cannot choose where to live’.  

An alternative reading of Halley’s almost obsessive depiction of architectural forms in his early-1980s paintings, in particular the recurrence of images of housing in the work, is that this demonstrates or expresses that his work is haunted or somehow shadowed by the mechanisms of gentrification and the ensuing social tensions outlined by Deutsche and Gendal Ryan. And yet, this connection would seem to remain an unconscious or suppressed aspect of the work. Because Halley, like so many other key figures in the East Village art scene, does not discuss gentrification directly, either in his essays or interviews from this period. Rather, his reflections upon the art scene he found himself at the centre of by the mid-1980s are coded with incidental language: the East Village art world was something that, in his own words, simply ‘came along’, rather than a phenomena designed by state and corporate interests keen to ‘revitalise’ the area.  

Deutsche and Gendel Ryan cite Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s often quoted remarks on what they describe as ‘one of the most enduring, self-serving myths in bourgeois thought’—the idea that intellectual figures, such as artists, form a category that is, in Gramsci’s words, ‘autonomous and independent from the dominant social group’. This count certainly applies to Halley. But this is only if we limit our understanding of the “dominant group” here to the Lower East Side’s gentrifying artists. However, to say Halley is an artist who considers himself as independent from his own,

dominant, class position would be a betrayal of a core aspect of his art. I have in mind here Halley’s careful examination of what we might call the “social geometry” of the kind of professional-managerial class formation he considers himself a part of. And while Halley’s art does not, as I have just argued, extend as far as examining the role that an artistic subsection of that class formation had in the transformation of the Lower East Side in the 1980s, it does, to some degree, operate self-reflexively vis-à-vis his own class certifications. This is something I want to now explore in more detail, while also bringing my analysis in this chapter to a close.

2.4 Burning Down the House

Writing in 1981, historian and cultural critic Marshall Berman proclaimed that, following the collapse of America’s economy in the 1970s, American artists were left in a situation in which they ‘couldn’t afford to annihilate the past and present in order to create a new world ex nihilo’.68 As he explained:

The great economic boom that had gone beyond all expectations, for a quarter of a century after the Second World War, was coming to a close. The combination of inflation and technological stagnation […] plus a developing world energy crisis (which we could ascribe in part to our spectacular success), was bound to take its toll […] The end of the boom did not endanger everyone—the very rich were pretty well insulated, as they usually are—but everyone’s vision of the modern world and its possibilities has come to be reshaped […] As the gigantic motors of economic

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growth and expansion stalled, and the traffic came close to a stop, modern societies abruptly lost their power to blow away their past […] Modernity could no longer afford to throw itself into “action lightened of all previous experience” (as [Paul] De Man put it), to “wipe away whatever came earlier in the hope of reaching at last a true present […] a new departure.”

As Berman also observes, in order to ‘come to terms with the world they had’, for artists working in this new, thoroughly changed world, memory would become an important critical tool. While post-war modernist artists may have ‘found themselves by forgetting’, Berman proposed that postmodern artists would be ‘forced to find themselves by remembering’.

But what to remember? Two years after Berman’s text was published, essayist and theorist Andreas Huyssen suggested that one aspect of postmodernist art’s criticality might be located ‘precisely in its radical questioning of those presuppositions which linked modernism […] to the mindset of modernization’. As he explained, the issue at hand in postmodernist art of the 1980s was not ‘what modernism really was, but rather how it was perceived retrospectively, what dominant values and knowledge it carried, and how it functioned ideologically and culturally after World War II’. When Halley began inscribing tropes of minimalist abstraction into his paintings, subverting these forms so as to transform them into tools for representing a range of different

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69 Berman, All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, 332
70 Berman, All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, 332
urban effects and contexts, I want to propose that he was critical memorialising the logic and the fate of modernisation in New York through modernist form.

This being so, we can say that in Halley’s prison paintings, and associated works from the 1980s, the exhaustion of one cultural paradigm—the Greenbergian conception of abstraction as a kind of self-contained, transcendent, autonomous model of art—is leveraged in order to explore the exhaustion of another: the socio-economic paradigm of Fordist, technocratic rationalism underpinning the design and implementation of modernist architecture and urbanism in New York during the 1950s and 1960s. In this way, Halley enacts a postmodernist procedure based upon the reciprocal critique of two distinct, yet historically related, spheres of modernist production—one cultural or artistic, the other industrial. As I have shown, this was a procedure designed to signal the historical situation in which Halley found himself in New York c.1980 vis-à-vis geometric painting and the city—both of which were in crisis at this time.

And so, while the dominant historical interpretation of Halley’s postmodernist painting frames his work art as a deleterious symptom of the historical disorientation wrought by the crises and political-economic transformations that followed the collapse of America’s established industrial economy from the late 1960s onwards, the reading I have put forward in this chapter offers a different view. While Halley’s art is without doubt a cultural symptom of momentous political-economic change, it is also an attempt to return a degree of fixity and historical groundedness to the ever-more fungible postmodern world of the 1980s by attempting to understand the social logic and impact of America’s recently elapsed industrial golden age. What is at stake in this art, then, is
the possibility of a new kind of historically reflexive abstract painting. A model of painting that maps and even passes judgement on history (artistic or social) through postmodernist techniques, such as pastiche and double coding. Halley envisions for abstract painting a new vocation as a kind of deconstructive or demystifying visual tool, device or apparatus. The paintings explored in this chapter help us perceive tensions determining capitalist space in early 1980s New York; they help us see capitalism.

I want to emphasise something again here. It is not that Halley’s paintings of the 1980s reflected this destabilising moment of historical change in New York. Rather, my focus has been on ways in which these works are marked by a set of historical dilemmas facing the city in the early 1980s. While my reading of Halley’s paintings of the 1980s is structured around the tension between two periods of capitalist development, an exhausted late-industrial moment and a post-industrial moment gradually superseding it (the subject of the next chapter), I want to conclude this chapter by discussing another contradiction that I think structures Halley’s prison paintings: a tension between images and notions of home, on the one hand, and a certain sense of homelessness, on the other.

Regarding images of home, this is no better illustrated than in Halley’s representation of his hometown, New York, in his painting. New York is, in many ways, the true subject of Halley’s painting, a fact he reflected upon in 2001:

I’ve now realized what I’ve been doing all these years as a New York painter without really thinking about it: responding to the
wonder of this city – its cacophonous energy, its shimmering sense of social reality, its absurd pretences and grandiosity.\textsuperscript{73}

Images of home are also present in Halley’s paintings in the form of reoccurring symbols of domestic architecture. These include apartment blocks represented externally (as sheer or planar surfaces) or internally, through Halley’s use of Roll-a-Tex—an allusion to the stuccoed walls and ceilings of suburban housing.

The architecture of urban renewal and the type of reductive, minimalist abstraction Halley quotes in his paintings of course share the same historical and geographical horizon. We are talking about the dominant art and architecture of New York City during a period of a few decades. As a child born in New York in the early 1950s, raised in midtown Manhattan amongst towering modernist office buildings, and exposed to forms of geometric art at a young age, it’s possible to say that Halley is, in some sense, \textit{at home} in the aesthetic language he both reproduces and attempts to criticise in his painting and writing. In this sense, Halley does not have a comfortable relationship with his own geometry, something he has expressed in his interviews:

Why are squares and geometry comforting to me? Is it really a form of comfort or a form of confinement? Why am I happy in a car or in a room alone? Is this something desirable, or is this a result

\textsuperscript{73} Peter Halley, ‘September 25, 2001’, in \textit{Peter Halley: Selected Essays}, 257. As Halley explains in this text, written shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks for the catalogue accompanying his solo exhibition \textit{Peter Halley Paintings} held at Waddington Galleries, London, between 17 October and 17 November 2001: ‘for twenty years I have lived just ten city blocks from those towers. I’ve spent most of my adult life in the environment immediately around them. The area that was damaged and destroyed is deeply imbedded in my memory; it’s where I’ve gone for walks, to restaurants, or to shop for things I need. Until six years ago, I made my paintings in this area as well, working in three different studios over the years’.
of being influenced by a certain set of messages from my culture?\textsuperscript{74}

The ambivalence expressed here clues us into Halley’s agency as a postmodern abstractionist. A core part of Halley’s work involves probing his own native compulsion towards geometry and square forms. Despite being, in a certain sense, ‘at home’ in orthogonal geometries (whether artistic or architectural), Halley’s practice involves the somewhat paradoxical attempt to cleave some sort of critical distance from his own geometry by implicating it in a coercive model of late-industrial capitalism. This is, in many ways, the source of the critical significance of the works explored in this chapter: geometry is invoked in such a way as to suggest its instrumentalisation by capital—an effect that in many way alienates its ‘homely’ potential. The terms of this contradiction—the idea that Halley is at once at home and alienated from his own geometry—would appear to not be mutually reconciled in the work. And yet, attending to this dilemma can help us understand what is really at stake in the prison paintings, and can help expose a new, far more nuanced and socially embedded understanding of these pictures than the current, still dominant, image of these works developed in the 1980s permits.

One way of recasting this argument, and Halley’s ambivalence as an abstractionist, is by returning to the arguments of Halley’s 1981 essay on Ross Bleckner. Halley’s decision to engage the iconography of the late-industrial city through forms of minimalist abstraction can be understood in terms of claims, articulated in that essay, regarding a generational, or ‘New Wave’, tendency amongst young artists working in New York during the early 1980s; an impulse to work with and through

\textsuperscript{74} Hixson, ‘Interview with Peter Halley’.
'images that are in some way emblematic of the Modernist era.' While Halley identified a tendency towards the ‘sociology’ of the ‘golden age of American expansion’ at work in Bleckner’s quotation of 1960s Op Art paintings, we can find an equivalent impulse in Halley’s use of forms of minimalist abstraction to critically expose the logic, and map the fate, of capital in the later post-war period in New York, leading up to and including the early 1980s.

As the late critic and novelist Fred Pfeil proposed in 1985, New Wave art appeared to adopt an increasingly confrontational stance regarding images of the homogenising and standardising impulses of post-war American life. For Pfeil, New Wave art looked upon those ‘trapped in and defined by the endlessly proliferating codes, clichés and slogans of everyday life’ with a kind of horror,

a horror whose underlying anxiety that even the subject him/herself feeling it is not “free” emerges in the mumbled choruses of Talking Heads’ “Once in a Lifetime” (Same as it ever was [...] same as it ever was).

For Pfeil, ‘the life with car and home and wife’ almost threateningly conjured up in *Once in a Lifetime* are images that speak to a world of crushing standardisation. What I want to propose is that Halley’s prison paintings adopt a postmodernist, New Wave stance that pushes back against ‘squares and geometry’ as expressions of the standardised, ‘same as it ever was’ world, into which Halley was born.

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Regarding this final point, Halley has offered some useful coordinates in his interviews for understanding his painting as a model for a kind of self-reflexive critique of his own social background. Most recently, speaking to Anne Leddy in 2021, Halley explained that

> When I was creating these landscapes [I was] trying to diagram the space in which we live—I’m still convinced we live in that space—what I thought I was doing was addressing a professional, managerial class that is responsible for constructing that space. And so, it was a critique—or a self-critique—of the class that I belong to, the society I belong to.\(^78\)

And speaking to Sundell and Beller in 1988, Halley described his work in similar terms—as a critique of his own class and background:

> My own sub-field of interest is not so much mass culture and its effect on a mass audience, but rather managerial and intellectual culture. Insofar as I am interested in geometry and urban organization, I’m concerned with the techniques that this managerial and intellectual culture utilizes to try to control and determine the direction of the culture […] I felt I was […] a member of this intellectual/managerial class which has become more and more a salaried class without any real ability to accumulate wealth, but which has access to certain

\(^78\) See Leddy, ‘Oral History Interview’.
kinds of knowledge and control. I’ve thought about trying to present its language in a more or less critical way, rather than in a way which endorses that language. Basic to that effort is the desire to take geometry out of the realm of the ideal and place it within the realm of the directive, within the realm of power. In other words, geometry is not a priori. It’s not perfect, it’s not platonic, it’s not something that gives the users of geometry the God-given right to organize things that way. It’s merely used because it’s so effective. That’s an initial distinction I try to make in the work.79

Holding these statements in mind, we can understand Halley’s prison paintings as artefacts that take a self-reflexive stance against his own social background. As paintings that attempt to reckon with a particular professional managerial mindset with which Halley associates.

Returning to Pfeil’s useful analysis of New Wave culture, in this sense Halley’s work expresses a complex critical relationship with, or reaction to, inherited images of “home” drawn from the lost future of golden age America that is on a par with New Wave musical expressions, such as those of Talking Heads. As Pfeil points out, a key aspect of this postmodernist, New Wave confrontation with the past involves the questioning and disruption of the codes of the traditional or “homely” culture:

The flip side [...] of the [...] desire for “home” will be the bliss of escaping from codification and definition altogether, by dispersing and scattering oneself through the codes and

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79 Sundell and Beller, ‘Interview’.
clichés – what I would call, borrowing yet another line from Talking heads, the pleasure of “Burning Down the House.”

In this sense, as a critical expression of historical memory or retrieval made through the revived language of an equally foreclosed model of art, Halley’s prison paintings adopt a postmodernist stance that attempts to disperse and scatter familiar codifications of the homely, every-present geometry of his paintings. Reorganised in this way, geometry is returned to the viewer loaded with new significations. Whether in historical forms of abstraction, or the urban landscape, in Halley’s painting we reencounter square forms as expressions of a particular model of standardised social life that is undergirded by forms of social control, and even forms of social dominance.

As we move into Chapter Three, a new question must be raised. While this chapter has explored Halley’s postmodernist abstractions as memorial works engaged with the social and artistic logic of an exhausted Fordist, late-industrial mode of production, the next chapter explores how Halley’s quotation of past art offered a reflection upon an emerging, post-industrial, or post-Fordist mode of production. This shift in historical orientation throws up many questions for Halley’s paintings. Questions that, in turn, will push us to consider critical possibilities for postmodernist abstraction beyond those reflective or memorial conceptions put forward by critics such as Berman and Huysssen. It is, then, to Halley’s conduit and Day-glo paintings, and their relationship to an incipient post-industrial mode of production in New York that we now turn.

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80 Pfeil, Another Tale to Tell, 111.

Figure 2.3. "Lincoln Square" (1956). Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/99407f80-9ef0-0130-f139-58d385a7bbd0
Figure 2.4. Demolition of Manhattan’s Gas House District (above) and construction of the Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village (1948) housing developments (below). Photographs by Thomas Airviews, 2 March 1948. Courtesy of Robert Beacham.
Figure 2.5. Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village (2018). Bloomberg News. 

Figure 2.6. Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village (2015). Michael Nagle / Bloomberg News. 
Figure 2.7. Andrew Prokos (2018). ‘Aerial view looking across the East Village from Midtown Manhattan’. https://andrewprokos.com/photo/gramercy-aerial-view/


Figure 2.12. ‘Fix it with Zinsser Wall and Ceiling Texture’ (2018) (screen shot). Rust-Oleum, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Bhg7hBYILg

Figure 2.14. Donald Judd (1962). *Untitled*. Cadmium red light oil, black enamel, wax and sand on canvas and wood with asphalt pipe, 128.3 x 114.3 x 24.5cm. Judd Foundation. https://juddfoundation.org/index-of-works/untitled-1962-6/

Figure 2.15. Jasper Johns (1954–1955). *Flag* (detail). Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood, three panels, 128.3 x 114.3 x 24.5cm. https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/493496071667554696/
Figure 2.16. Robert Ryman (1961). *Untitled*. Oil on unstretched linen, 27.3 x 26cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York City. https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78950

Figure 2.17. Halley's 3-inch stretchers. Image: Peter Halley (1986). *Black Cells with Conduit*. Acrylic, fluorescent acrylic, Flashe, and Roll-a-Tex on canvas. https://www.contemporaryartlibrary.org/project/peter-halley-at-modern-art-london-10248/2


Figure 2.29. Peter Halley (1980). *Apartment House / Prison*. Marker ink and graphite with correction fluid on graph paper, 43.2 x 55.9 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art. https://www.contemporaryartlibrary.org/project/peter-halley-at-modern-art-london-10248/23
Figure 2.30. Peter Halley (1981). *Freudian Painting* (detail showing unprimed canvas). Acrylic and Roll-a-Tex on canvas, 183 x 366cm. [https://www.thebroad.org/art/peter-halley/freudian-painting](https://www.thebroad.org/art/peter-halley/freudian-painting)

Figure 2.31. Helen Frankenthaler (1952). *Mountains and Sea*. Oil and charcoal on canvas, 220 x 297.8cm. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation. [https://www.frankenthalerfoundation.org/artworks/mountains-and-sea/details/all](https://www.frankenthalerfoundation.org/artworks/mountains-and-sea/details/all)

Figure 2.33. Morris Louis (1958). Dalet Aleph. Acrylic resin (Magna) on canvas, 230 x 381cm. Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). http://morrislouis.org/paintings/veil-paintings2/du137

Figure 2.35. Sodium Vapour lamps, Tompkins Square Park (2015). https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/02/new-yorks-street-lamps-in-flux


CHAPTER THREE

Shadow Networks and Screen Light: Conduit and Day-glo Paintings (1981–1987)

Sometime in 1983 Halley visited a small production studio in New York City where he worked with a computer technician to create *Exploding Cell* (1983) (Figure 3.1), an 8-minute long video animated digital video animation. To date his only moving image artwork, *Exploding Cell* depicts a number of scenarios involving interactions between architectural motifs first developed in the painting—prisons, apartment houses, cells—and conduits, which move beneath these architectural forms, connecting up with them in different ways. The animation begins with an all-black screen. The grating, tinny sound of a computer's rapidly modulating piezoelectric speaker can be heard as a twitching, crudely pixelated white line moves across the black screen at mid-point, forming the kind of ground plane central to the traditional, fixed point, linear perspective of Halley's paintings. This line traces an apartment house type structure. Then the ground beneath it turns red, just as a black conduit passes beneath it. As the conduit reaches the base of the apartment house, its windows disappear and it transforms into a solid grey cell. The conduit then plugs into this cell and pumps a strange yellow substance into it. With the grating piezoelectric audio still humming in the background, the substance is released as smoke from a smokestack that suddenly sprouts from the cell. The cell then turns red before violently exploding, leaving a cloud of dust and a pile of glowing debris behind. Following this opening narrative, *Exploding Cell* goes on to explore a number of other scenarios: tunnels and bunkers form beneath the ground; chromatic experiments take place in which solid blocks of blue and yellow occupy half of
the screen at a time; and, finally, buildings—apartments, prisons, and tower block-like structures—are outlined, then disappear, in quick succession.

The pixelated graphics, black on Day-glo colour, and crude electrified audio situate *Exploding Cell* at the dawn of an era of widely accessible computer technology. Watching fidgety pixels trace the outline of recognisable forms such as buildings, or tweak across the screen to resemble moving objects, is immediately reminiscent of the sensibility of early 1980s 8-bit computer game technology, seminal arcade titles such as *Space Invaders* (1979) or *Pac-Man* (1980) (Figures 3.2–3.3).¹ Two years after this animation was made, Halley reflected on how his paintings were moving towards the aesthetic paradigm of computer technology:

I see myself as having set out elements of an imagery or theoretical world and that slowly I’m building in more and more elements. It’s sort of a through-the-looking-glass thing, as if one were inside this imaginary world and gradually walking around and discovering or finding out more elements. I’m reminded of that movie *Tron* that came out a few years ago; it described somebody playing a video game who was actually thrown into the video game environment. This person was walking around in an entirely synthetic geometric world, and that’s what I’m trying to describe in my painting more and more.²

Just as Halley’s paintings can be read as a stage for exploring the urban space of a real metropolis like New York City, they can also be read as engaging with the ‘synthetic’

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² Siegel, ‘The Artist-Critic of the Eighties’.
space generated by new technologies. And while Halley's emphasis here is on the blocky, clunky, 8-bit aesthetic of early computer games somehow being reproduced in his own reductive, orthogonal iconographic motifs, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, we can take Halley's interest in the visual language of computers as emblematic of a wider interest in the question of how to represent, in painting, the complex layers of information technology necessary to make this one-off experimental animation, as well as his wider interest in the social and economic significance and implications of computers.

By the early 1980s, it was becoming increasingly evident that network technologies, forms of open source software, and the increasing availability and distribution of personal computers was giving rise to a new kind of society in America. Underlining this growing awareness, and as a good example to the status of popular thinking regarding computing around the time Halley made Exploding Cell, Time magazine eschewed their normal practice of naming a ‘man of the year’ at the beginning of the new year to instead nominate the computer as ‘machine of the year’ for 1982. The 3 January 1983 edition of Time announced this nomination with a now famous cover depicting a white papier-mâché sculpture of a man sitting in front of a desktop computer (Figure 3.4). Inside was an article by historian and author Otto Friedrich, titled ‘The Computer Moves In’, which begins with a pithy description of an advertisement encountered at a computer trade fair in a Las Vegas convention centre:
WILL SOMEONE PLEASE TELL ME, the bright red advertisement asks in mock irritation, WHAT A PERSONAL COMPUTER CAN DO? The ad provides not merely an answer, but 100 of them. A personal computer, it says, can send letters at the speed of light, diagnose a sick poodle, custom-tailor an insurance program in minutes, test recipes for beer. Testimonials abound. Michael Lamb of Tucson figured out how a personal computer could monitor anaesthesia during surgery; the rock group Earth, Wind and Fire uses one to explode smoke bombs onstage during concerts; the Rev. Ron Jaenisch of Sunnyvale, Calif, programmed his machine so it can recite an entire wedding ceremony.3

Friedrich goes on to argue that technological developments, such as the reduction in size of the silicon chip, have advanced so much that computers are now accessible to millions:

In 1982 a cascade of computers beeped and blipped their way into the American office, the American school, the American home. The “information revolution” that futurists have long predicted has arrived, bringing with it the promise

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of dramatic changes in the way people live and work, perhaps even in the way they think. America will never be the same.\footnote{Friedrich, ‘The Computer Moves In’}.

The economy, in particular, was impacted by the rising tide of computerisation. By the early-1980s, computers and their subtending networks were increasingly prominent in, and central to, new economic structures and systems that had emerged in the wake of the breakdown and decay of more traditional models of industrial production in America, and elsewhere—another issue taken and explored by Fredric Jameson in his essay, ‘Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism’ (1984). Though cautioning against any overtly deterministic view of technology (such a view would go against the core Marxist tenant that the single determining factor in history is the self-valorising movement of capital itself), Jameson nonetheless emphasises that new computer powered technological systems and structures have become dominant in the economic situation emerging in the 1980s, in many ways becoming inseparable from the image of a networked, fluid, global post-industrial economy.\footnote{Jameson, Postmodernism, 35. For an extended discussion of what he calls ‘wrongheaded’ notions of technological determinism in social theory, see David Harvey, A Companion to Marx’s Capital (London; New York: Verso, 2010), 189–201.} Indeed, for Jameson, the significance of the new, ‘immense communicational and computer network[s]’ is bound up with ‘something deeper’, as he observes:

The technology of contemporary society is […] mesmerising and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged shorthand for grasping a network of power
and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp [namely] [...] the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism.\(^6\)

As highlighted by Jameson here, new technologies and the emerging economic structures from which they are, in a sense, indistinguishable, pose significant problems for representation. While the machines of earlier capitalist stages remained ‘sculptural solids’ in space (objects of fascination for Futurist art, such as the machine gun and the automobile are cited alongside Le Corbusier’s machine like ‘utopian structures’), Jameson points out that as vast, distributed network forms, ‘it is immediately obvious that the technology of our own moment no longer possesses this same capacity for representation’.\(^7\)

In response to this issue, in this chapter I explore Halley’s use of conduits and Day-glo paint in paintings made between 1981 and 1987 in terms of the problem of how to represent new computer technologies and the emergent economic and communicational systems with which they are irrevocably bound up with. I treat these elements in the painting as attempts to find ways to represent problems of legibility or visibility associated with the arcane strangeness of a new computerised machine age and the “dematerialisation” of the post-industrial economy with which this new “information age” had become synonymous.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 36.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Halley’s attempt to represent advanced capitalism’s new computerised networks through an aesthetic vocabulary of quoted and subverted modernist forms was, for some critics, seen as highly problematic. As Hal Foster argued, there was no way that abstract modernist-type painting was adequate to the task of representing advanced technological systems, as well as the networks of power and control expressed or symptomised through those technological systems. Mirroring Jameson’s point of two years earlier, Foster argued that complex, often shadowy social forms such technological networks ‘defy representation’ and cannot, therefore, be easily depicted aesthetically—‘at least not in the manner of modernist forms’. As Foster noted

If we inhabit a new social space of immanent flows and simulated effects, as Halley suggests, it is not at all clear that it can be painted, let alone represented, by a simple image of a cell and conduit. His painted image, its metaphoric functions, its iconic placement on a Cartesian grid—all of these elements constitute a mode of representation incommensurate with the hypothesis of a new social network of cybernetic interconnection.  

Was Foster correct to say it was an error to imagine that forms of minimalist abstraction could offer a meaningful representation of new computerised technologies? Or, is there something in Halley’s particular model of abstraction that might help us see the abstract networks and technologies of advanced capitalism in a meaningful way? One of the tasks of this chapter is to think through these questions by exploring the way

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9 Foster, ‘Signs Taken as Wonders’, 88.
technological forms, systems, and networks are represented in paintings made by Halley between 1981 and 1987.

The paintings I explore in this chapter not only actively prompt us to consider the question of the *representability* of Halley’s presentation of the technologies of advanced capitalism. In line with my ambition to read Halley’s paintings of the 1980s as works that pierce the kind of distorted appearances generated by the particular way in which capitalist societies are organised, I hope to demonstrate how Halley uses the complex means that minimalist abstraction affords to reveal the essential capitalist logic at work beneath the putative, certainly mystifying appearances of computers in 1980s American society. It’s important to note, I think, how the historical trajectory of computer networks infused these new technologies with a particular appearance as progressive, democratic tools with the capacity to improve lives. As political theorist Jon Askonas has argued, what was at work in this narrative was a particular emancipatory notion of computing with its roots in 1960s counterculture. Founded on the premise that ‘providing more people with more information and better tools, and helping them connect with each other, would help them lead better, freer, richer lives’, the early computer industry projected a particular kind of social vision. As Askonas observes,

This vision is best understood as a descendant of the California counterculture, another way of extending decentralized, bottom-up power to the people. The story is told in Fred Turner’s 2006 book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and*
the Rise of Digital Utopianism. Turner writes that Stewart Brand, erstwhile editor of the counterculture magazine Whole Earth Catalogue, ‘suggested that computers might become a new LSD, a new small technology that could be used to open minds and reform society.’ Indeed, Steve Jobs came up with the name “Apple Computing” from living in an acid-infused commune at an Oregon apple orchard.\textsuperscript{10}

While ‘Silicon Valley’s tech founders envisioned a world where information technology directly contributed to an increasingly democratic and emancipated society, characterized by decentralization, a do-it-yourself attitude, and an independence of thought associated with […] their brand of Sixties counterculture’, these utopian aspirations did not meet the reality of life in 1980s America, a world in which computers had become central tools in a new economy.\textsuperscript{11} While Askonas’ own research points to the hegemony of big tech firms such as Google and Meta in our contemporary moment; and while other studies have pointed to the ways network technologies have generated new, exploitative labour conditions, alongside a new kind of ‘panoptic’ surveillance culture, in this chapter I point to an earlier technologically grounded context by exploring Halley’s images of computer networks in terms of a specific form of network technology—that of global electronic financial markets.

As I show, these markets, and the new models of accumulation they facilitated, were instrumental in New York’s transformation back into a global economic centre

\textsuperscript{11} Askonas, ‘How Tech Utopian Fostered Tyranny’, 12.
during the 1980s. In an attempt to move on from the crisis years of the 1970s and early-1980s, conservative, aggressively capitalistic interventions into the previous socially-democratic mandate underpinning New York’s governance took place. This led to significant changes in the vision for the city, marking a moment in which ‘the bankruptcy—economic and moral alike—of liberal politics’, as Kim Philips-Fein describes it, was accepted by all major stakeholders in the city.\(^\text{12}\) In the place of this liberal vision came a neoliberal model of governance that promoted what sociologist Saskia Sassen has called ‘global electronic markets’ as the solution to New York’s economic problems.\(^\text{13}\) In the following pages I pay particular attention to how Halley’s work can help us grasp and understand the abstraction of these markets—ways in which network technology resulted in the mystification of economic processes taking place in financial transactions. I do this by framing the ‘underground conduits’ that appear in Halley’s painting in 1981, and quickly begin to proliferate, as features that, together with Halley’s use of a second panel, in some way figure or represent the form of finance as of a new, largely “submerged”, global economic system that came to be hegemonic by mid-1980s New York.

If the “underground conduits” in Halley’s paintings of the 1980s are read as representations or depictions of opaque computerised financial systems, then I associate Halley’s use of glowing Day-glo colour from 1981 onwards with another late-capitalist abstraction: the increasing mediation of lives lived in 1980s America by screen-based technologies. Speaking to Kathryn Hixson in 1991 about his decision to

\[^{12}\text{Phillips-Fein, Fear City, 4}\]
use Day-glo colour, Halley stated that he was ‘trying to emphasize technologically
derived materials […] the quality of the glow that it produced seemed very artificial,
unnatural and eerie to me. In a quite traditional way, I have always been interested in
light in painting’. This is an interest in light that I link to the increasing ubiquity of light-
producing screen technologies from the 1980s onwards, as well as the question of how
these screens mediate our lives.

And so, beginning with Halley’s adaptation of tropes of line and support from past
painting to create a representation of the new, subterranean networks of global finance,
then continuing to explore how Halley’s quotation use of Day-glo painting evoked a
quality of synthetic light that can be associated with screen-based technologies, I now
want to now explore the new developments in Halley’s painting from 1983 onwards in
more detail.

3.1 Network Paintings

By 1983 Halley was occupied with generating resolutely technical-looking
paintings. In Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber (1983) (Figure 3.5), for
example, Halley’s obsessive commitment to precise facture results in a factual,
diagrammatic painting of a network-type arrangement plotted over a landscape setting
generated by two joined together canvases. Occupying the upper part of this 178 x
203cm sized canvas are two black Roll-a-Tex cells set against an unprimed canvas
background. Beneath the cells, one of which is larger than the other, is a second canvas
panel in slate grey. In the far right-hand corner is another cell form, or what Halley here
calls a “chamber”. This chamber is not painted. Rather, it has been made by taping off a

14 Hixson, ‘Interview’.
square of unprimed canvas from the rest of the slate grey lower panel. Running from the top of this chamber are two thin Day-glo red conduits that travel upwards, out of the “underground chamber”. One of these lines connects at multiple points with the black cells above them, while the other turns at a right angle, moving horizontally through the grey lower canvas, exiting it on the left-hand side. It is easy to see in this work the form of a rudimentary network structure: nodes, in the form of black Roll-a-Tex and raw canvas cells, linked together by circuits, in the form of the Day-glo red conduits.

In one of the few moments he spoke directly about his own paintings in his essays, Halley described *Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber*, in terms charged with technological intensity:

> In my work, space is considered as [...] a digital field in which are situated “cells” with simulated stucco texture from which flow irradiated “conduits”. This space is akin to the simulated space of the videogame, of the microchip, and of the office tower—a space that is not a specific reality but rather a model of the “cellular space on which cyberneticized social exchange” is based, which “irradiates the social body with its operational circuits.”

As we move towards the mid-1980s, we can see that Halley is increasingly occupied with exploring the ‘operational circuits’ of computerised network technologies in paintings that are flatly factual and diagrammatic. Over the course of 1983 Halley produced a number of paintings that followed the network-like format of *Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber*, paintings such as *Cell with Underground Conduit*.

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and Chamber (Figure 3.6), and Rectangular Cell with Conduit (1983) (Figure 3.7). And, as I will now demonstrate, we can understand this focus in the painting to reflect the increasing prominence of computer networks in the 1980s, as both material forms reconfiguring older economic systems and structures, and as “organising concepts” apposite for a world increasingly imagined as a seamlessly interconnected and networked “global village”.¹⁶

As economic sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina has observed, ‘if social scientists were infatuated with the concepts of bureaucracy and hierarchy in the past, they are now infatuated with the ideas of network and connectivity’.¹⁷ As a novel, historically specific organising concept or structure, the idea of the network ‘draws on a powerful convergence or organizational changes, technological developments, and broader cultural transformations that took place during the 1970s and 1980s, and which also sustain the character of the network concept as a model and advertisement for how business in any area should be conducted’.¹⁸ Crucially, Knorr Cetina identifies computer based technologies as instrumental in this new network culture. Citing sociologist Manuel Castell’s pioneering work on networks, she writes that:

The most important convergent development that contributes to network concepts is surely that of information and communication technologies which are based on electronic linkages between geographic areas and are referred to in terms of a vocabulary of

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¹⁶ This term comes from media theorist, Marshall McLuhan. As McLuhan wrote in 1962: ‘electro-magnetic discoveries have recreated the simultaneous “field” in all human affairs so that the human family now exists under conditions of a “global village.” We live in a single constricted space resonant with tribal drums’. See Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 34.


nets, webs, circuits, and nodes. These have strengthened pre-existing trends toward network forms or organizations and facilitated some of these developments. Castells accordingly writes of the network society where ‘flows of messages and images between networks constitute the basic thread of our social structure’ (1996: 476–7). He sees dominant functions organized in global information technology networks linked by these flows.¹⁹

Understood in this way, networks of information technology become a privileged organisational mode that defines a new trend in the late-capitalist mode of production emerging in the 1980s.

While we can associate Halley’s underground conduits with network technologies in general, I want to now thicken my reading of these motifs by exploring a specific type of network technology—that of the global electronic financial markets that were instrumental in the transformation of New York’s economy during the 1980s. Following this, I will return to Halley’s approach to line and support in his diagrammatic network paintings to make a number of arguments as to why I think these works can help us grasp and appreciate the opacity and inscrutability of incipient technological networks.

3.2 Seeing Finance

The economic crisis that engulfed New York in the 1970s galvanised a rapid and severe shift towards the consensus opinion that the only way forward was drastic cuts to the city budget and the reorganisation of the way the city did business. Compelling these deep-reaching and excoriating changes was a cohort of private bankers and

money-managers who, in a complex play of power, found themselves in a position of authority over the beleaguered city government. As Kim Philips-Fein makes clear, the people who would have the ‘deciding vote’ on New York’s future, ‘would be those who belonged to the moneyed elite: the ones who could decide whether or not to invest in New York, who had the access to private capital on which, it was suddenly clear, the city relied’. ‘For the bankers who rebelled against the city’s old fiscal practices’, continues Phillips-Fein, ‘it became the chance to assert a modern, technocratic, and market orientated ethos, rejecting New York’s long tradition of a robust public sector’. Accordingly, when New York did begin to emerge from its crisis years in the early 1980s, it came back a different city. It was a city that no longer manufactured things, nor did it any longer aspire to serve its diverse population through a set of hard-won public provisions and welfare programs. Rather, the new city focused on capital generation, mainly through finance, driven by a new entrepreneurial class powered by computer technologies and greased by new sources of money capital that began to flow rapidly through global electronic market networks.

As literary critic Leigh Clare La Berge observes, ‘the United States in the 1980s was beset by a phase of overaccumulation of money capital’ which ‘arrived from abroad through the third-world debt crisis’ and from home, ‘as money already here was given

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20 Philips-Fein, Fear City, 7–8.
21 Manufacturing in New York City employed 1 million people in 1950. By the early 1990s, this had dropped to 200,000. By 2015 the number was around 76,000. John Aidan Byrne, ‘Manufacturing Jobs Disappearing From City’, New York Post (15 February 2015), accessed 15 September 2020, https://nypost.com/2015/02/15/manufacturing-jobs-vanishing-from-city/. 
the freedom to circulate more quickly and expansively as a result of banking deregulation'. As Jameson has noted of this same situation:

The rich were certainly doing something with all this new income that no longer needed to be wasted on social services; rather than go into new factories, it seemed to get invested in the stock market. Whence a second perplexity: The Soviets used to joke about the miracle of their system, whose edifice seemed comparable only to those houses kept standing by the swarm of termites eating away inside them. But some of us had the same feeling about the United States. After the disappearance (or brutal downsizing) of heavy industry, the only thing that seemed to keep it going (besides the two prodigious American industries of food and entertainment) was the stock market.

This shift towards markets indicated the increasing dominance of networks as new, horizontal and distributed social forms. However, compared with the base in manufacturing that had defined New York’s economy previously, the shift towards a market and finance-oriented economy was in many ways a shift towards a far less transparent economic mode.

As economists Francisco Louçã and Michael Ash describe it, what emerged in the 1980s, particularly in financial hubs like New York City, was a ‘shadow banking system’ defined, above all, by the opacity of finance and processes of financialisation.

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and financial speculation.\textsuperscript{24} As Louçã and Ash explain, required for these processes are vast technological networks carrying an almost unfathomable volume of computerised financial transactions. It’s hard if not impossible to even estimate the scale of the transactions taking place on this new network system:

Twice the size of world output? Probably much more. The size of the shadow banking system is not rigorously computed; perhaps it is not even computable, given the obscure dimensions, indefinite boundaries, hidden values, artificially priced assets, and enormous divergence between notional and actual values contained within a labyrinth of institutions and products. In any case, this mountain of capital and debt is the most important iceberg in the world of financialization.\textsuperscript{25}

Louçã and Ash continue to explain that whereas prior to the 1970s ‘commercial banks were the exclusive institutions that intermediated between savers and borrowers’, 1980s deregulation replaced the more or less direct link between the two parties mediated by banks with long, complex chains or networks of transactions involving multiple additional institutions and actors, including financial companies, money market mutual funds, international cash pools, investment banks, and other external agents.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{24} Louçã and Ash offer the following definition of finance and financialisation: ‘what is loosely called “financialization” is a forest of changes going from deregulation of the financial sector, freeing capital flows, to new financial products, to market-based intermediation replacing traditional credit systems, elevating institutional investors as big players, favouring boom and bust in asset markets, imposing social norms of shareholder value dominance or, as one author puts it, “financialization means the increasing role of financial motives, financial markets, financial actors, and financial institutions in the operation of the domestic and international economies”’ (their quote is taken from Gerald A. Epstein, ‘Introduction: Financialization and the World Economy’, in Financialization and the World Economy, ed. Gerald A. Epstein (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2005b), 3. See Francisco Louçã and Michael Ash, Shadow Networks: Financial Disorder and the System that Caused Crisis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 65.

\textsuperscript{25} Louçã and Ash, Shadow Networks, 65.

\textsuperscript{26} Louçã and Ash, Shadow Networks, 68.
Whereas the old banking system generated money through ‘interest rate spread, low inflation, and presumptions of repayments’—i.e. the conservative or prudent management of risk and competition within a simplistic transactional chain—in the late-1970s and 1980s banks began to make money through the risky extension of transactional chains across ever-expanding financial networks:

Bankers make money by making many deals and by collecting service fees. Three deals are better than two and so on. The traditional intermediation of a lender depositing funds in the bank and the bank lending funds to a qualified borrower provides a single interest-rate spread and, at most, two opportunities for fees. But an extended chain of a lender providing funds to a money market fund, a money market fund providing funds to a bank, for example, by a reverse repo, a bank financing (and perhaps operating) a mortgage company, and the mortgage company providing funds to a borrower seeking to buy a new house offers five opportunities for fees […] Bankers also make money by making leveraged deals that maximize profits with minimal outlay by the bankers themselves. Both fees for service and leveraging up proved high-profit activities for bankers who for many years had to content themselves with collecting the spread between their depositor and borrower interest rates. But the new banking creates new systemic risks. The additional deals in the lending chain constitute a proliferation of interconnections, a multiplication of counterparty risk, and opportunities for informational
asymmetries, exercises of power, and confidence about probabilities that diverges from actual risks.\footnote{Louçã and Ash, \textit{Shadow Networks}, 9}

These chains or interconnections thus take the form of a vast, unrepresentable financial network.

This opacity or unrepresentability is something that Jameson highlights in his 1997 essay ‘Culture and Finance Capital’ by way of a reading of Giovanni Arrighi’s conception of finance in \textit{The Long Twentieth Century} (1994). As Jameson argues, Arrighi’s historical account of capitalist development suggests a basis for the inherent complexity or opacity of economic systems in which finance has become dominant. ‘The most exciting feature’ of Arrighi’s text, proposes Jameson, is its transformation of Marx’s famous formula for the valorisation of capital in a single exchange—‘M-C-M’—into a representation of an expanding historical ‘dialectic of accumulation’.\footnote{In a section called ‘The Metamorphosis of Commodities’ in chapter three of volume 1 of \textit{Capital: Money, or the Circulation of Commodities}, Marx outlines two distinct processes of exchange. The first, C-M-C, describes a process in which a given commodity ‘C’ is exchanged for money ‘M’ which is then, in turn, used to buy a different commodity ‘C’. However, in capitalist exchange this process is reconfigured. Instead, already accumulated money ‘M’ is spent on commodities ‘C’ which are then used in such a way as to generate a surplus of money ‘M’—i.e. capital. See Karl Marx, \textit{Capital Volume 1} (London: Penguin, 1990), 198–209.} For Arrighi, the first two stages of this dialectic, ‘M’ and ‘C’, represent on the one hand early trade networks and various problematic forms of original or primitive accumulation that result in the acquisition of money for subsequent capitalisation, and, on the other hand, the valorisation or capitalisation of that money through different forms of production. But, as Jameson observes of Arrighi’s second ‘C’ stage, ‘this second stage knows internal limits, which weigh on production, distribution, and consumption alike’, resulting in falling rates of profit.
At this point, the third stage begins, which is the moment that primarily interests us here. Arrighi’s treatment of this—the recurrent moment of a cyclical finance capitalism—is inspired by Braudel’s remark that “the stage of financial expansion” is always “a sign of autumn”. Speculation—the withdrawal of profits from the home industries, the increasingly feverish search, not so much for new markets (those are also saturated) as for the new kind of profits available in financial transactions themselves and as such—is the way in which capitalism now reacts to and compensates for the closing of its productive moment.

Crucially for the question of finance and abstraction that concerns us here, at this point money becomes in a second sense and to a second degree abstract (it always was abstract in the first and basic sense), as though somehow in the national moment money still had a content. It was cotton money, or wheat money, textile money, railroad money, and the like. Now, like the butterfly stirring within the chrysalis, it separates itself from that concrete breeding ground and prepares to take flight [...] This free-floating capital, in its frantic search for more profitable investments [...] will begin to live its life in a new context: no longer in the factories and the spaces of extraction and production, but on the floor of the stock market, jostling for more intense profitability.  

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Jameson’s account goes on to suggest something that La Berge also emphasises in her reading of the financial turn of the 1980s—that one of the central problems thrown up by the shift towards an economy dominated by finance and the stock markets is that of representation itself. As Jameson writes, ‘it won't be as one industry competing with another branch, nor even one productive technology against another more advanced one in the same line of manufacturing, but rather in the form of speculation itself: spectres of value, as Derrida might put it, vying against each other in a vast, world-wide, disembodied phantasmagoria’. 30

And so, one way to diagnose the problem of the rise of finance in New York is by framing its appearance as signalling something like a dislocation between the scales at which economic power in the city operated and were visible and understood. While by no means a transparent political-economic system (as Marx might argue, opacity determines the fetish-like logic of all bourgeois exchange economies), the proud, socially democratic polity, as Joshua B. Freeman has described late-industrial era New York, was grounded in the interrelation and correspondence between public institutions, and undergirded by a strong sense of that the city was here to support the public itself—the people of New York. This all changed after the Fiscal Crisis, as the city shifted from more tangible or concrete forms of public life, towards more private and cryptic economic constellations undergirded by the logic of finance itself.

As La Berge’s literary analysis suggests, representational problems thrown up by this shift can be usefully staged through the exploration and analysis of cultural

production during the 1980s. As La Berge notes, finance in the 1980s is often culturally represented ‘as a distinctly private and complicated economic form’:

Finance was conceived of as private in that it delimited a rich psychic interior, and as complicated or complex in that few could understand its exterior representation. Indeed, financial transactions became, in the discourse of the period, too complicated or complex to explain either to lay people, or, increasingly, to the financial community in which the transactions originated.\(^1\)

While La Berge’s own research concerns ways the hegemony of finance is represented in 1980s American literature, my concern here is ways in which Halley’s paintings might be said to somehow represent the privacy and complexity of shadow banking networks powering New York City’s decisive turn towards finance.

But in what way do Halley’s paintings help us grasp the specific problems of representation generated by an economy receding away from production, and reorganising itself as a ‘vast, world-wide, disembodied phantasmagoria’ of speculation? Given the opacity and complexity of global electronic financial markets, what can these...

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\(^1\) La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction*, 10. The idea that financial transactions generating obscene amounts of money were too complicated or complex for even those making those transactions to fully understand is captured in trader Michael Lewis’ seminal 1989 biographical account of working on the trading floor of notorious bulge bracket investment bank Salomon Brothers during the finance boom of the 1980s. As Lewis writes of the surprising lack of awareness about the logic of financial systems amongst his colleagues, ‘the ultimate expression of our dumb compliance was in not asking at the outset why the money flowed so freely and how long it would last. The answer could be found on the Salomon Brothers’ trading floor, perhaps more easily than anywhere in Wall Street, but many never bothered to work it out’. Michael Lewis, *Liar’s Poker* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 57.
works of abstraction help us grasp about these systems? After all, as critics such as Foster correctly observed, the very simplicity of these paintings—their evident “minimalism”—would appear to come up against the shadowy complexity of what Jameson described earlier as ‘network[s] of power and control […] difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp’.  

To begin with, we might say that the dry, informational quality of works such as *Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber*, *Cell with Underground Conduit and Chamber*, and *Rectangular Cell with Conduit*—an emotionally disinvested visual quality mirrored in their purely descriptive titles—speaks of these paintings as human attempts to depict or represent properly inhuman technical systems and structures, arcane things ordinarily unavailable to our senses. Isomorphically arranged on the plane of the canvas, these iconic depictions of technical systems exploit a diagrammatic vocabulary, while simultaneously refusing to reveal what we are actually looking at, placing the viewer in the role of a confused observer of some abstract machine or technical system that fails to offer up its meaning or function.

Beyond the absence of any interpretative clues within the kind of space depicted in the painting, we might also consider Halley’s innovative use of support as somehow thematising this opacity on a structural, as opposed to an iconic, level. A key aspect in generating images that appear to thematise the opacity of network technologies is Halley’s use of two canvas panels in his painting. First introduced into the painting in *Prison with Conduit* (1981) (Figure 3.8), and used frequently since, this adaptation of support and surface involves bolting a second canvas panel to the bottom stretcher of

an upper canvas. While the second, lower panel is always the same width as the upper panel, in the earliest two canvas works made between 1981 and 1983 the lower panel was usually around a quarter of the total space of the painting. However, with the network-type paintings of 1983, the 1:4 ratio between the smaller lower panel and the larger upper panel changes, the size and pictorial prominence of the lower panel being significantly increased. This, in a way, shifts the emphasis of these paintings away from the upper panel and towards the lower panel. Thus, for a short time in 1983, Halley’s paintings appear conceived from the ground up and, as such, seem to draw our attention to what is going on below the usually more prominent site of the upper canvas panel.

Once again, Halley’s adaptation of the support of his paintings demonstrates his postmodernist method of harnessing artistic effects and tendencies from 1950s and 1960s geometric abstraction. The addition of a second canvas panel can be associated with innovative adaptations of support and line in American abstract geometric painting. Ellsworth Kelly, for example, began making paintings composed of differently sized, individually crafted stretchers joined together to make a single painting while living in Paris in the late 1950s. After returning to New York in 1954, where he set up his studio first in the Coentis Slip area and then later on West 67th Street, in 1970 Kelly moved to upstate New York, to Chatham—a small town 25 miles or so from Albany, New York’s state capital. There he began his Chatham Series (Figure 3.9)—fourteen paintings made the year after his move. While the proportion of the works in the series varies, each painting adopts the same structure: two monochromatic canvases joined together at a right angle to form an architectural ‘ell’ shape (an ell being the wing of a building
perpendicular to the length of its main range). The right-angled form of *Chatham XII Yellow Black* (1971) (Figure 3.10), for example, the way it appears weighted to the left, with the right hand portion of the upper canvas panel trailing behind it, takes its cue from the profile of the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, a work Kelly was familiar with due to his visits to the Louvre in Paris during the early 1950s. This boiling down of a real thing into an essentialised abstraction is suggestive of Halley’s own approach to abstraction. But whereas Kelly uses the second panel to suggest compressed volume, a longing out around a ‘corner’ of a building, for example, or the form of a famous ancient Greek votive sculpture, Halley uses his second panel quite differently.

In Halley’s hands, the additional panel generates a kind of landscape-type image in his painting, with the seam between the two panels marking a ground plane or horizon line in the picture. This, in turn, creates a distinction in the spatial logic of the work. What we get, in other words, is the construction of two kinds of world in the painting: one “above ground”, and therefore suggestive of visibility or appearance; the other “underground”, suggestive of what we cannot see. Speaking of his use of a second canvas panel along the lines of this kind of spatial determination, Halley told Jeanne Siegel in 1985:

> for me the canvas underneath is always underground; it is the underground element […] There’s a break and below that the section continues and we’re getting into a world underground, a hidden world, and that usually involves the conduits and things flowing from one of the cells to the next.33

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33 Siegel, ‘The Artist-Critic of the Eighties’. 
Similarly, Halley told Trevor Fairbrother in 1988: ‘It’s about above versus below-ground, visible versus hidden, and maybe even the conscious and subconscious’.\(^3^4\)

In this sense, the underground conduits that populate Halley’s network paintings take on a specific kind of significance as concealed or withdrawn structures. As Halley explained to Dan Cameron:

> One of the initial motivations in my work is that when I first came to New York, I was so fascinated by facades and decoration. If you went into an office building everything was covered with marble, or wood panelling, or what have you. And I was fascinated by the idea that the conduits, the supportive structure, was always hidden. I thought to some extent this was a characteristic of contemporary society, or of capitalism in general. I aspired to actually ferret out and bring forward some of those structural conditions that existed behind the facades.\(^3^5\)

And so, having been struck in 1980 by the awesome material presence of New York, by 1983 Halley was looking at the city differently. While he had initially been concerned by the implacable objectivity of New York’s architecture and built landscape, he was now looking at the city in terms of structures characteristic of contemporary capitalism that somehow resist or defy sensual apprehension.

Key to Halley’s engagement with the hidden structural conditions of capitalism is the paradoxical diagrammatic logic of his images of networks. Halley’s addition of a

\(^3^4\) Fairbrother, ‘Interview’.
second canvas panel in his paintings from 1981 onwards opened up the possibility of a new kind of schematic mode of representation. This marks a shift away from the fixed point, or anthropomorphic “surveyor space” of the earlier architectural paintings explored in Chapter Two. While Halley’s paintings of walls, prisons, and apartments seem to retain a reasonably traditional, if flattened out, sense of pictorial space, the appearance of underground conduits in *Prison with Conduit* does away with the notion that the viewer is located in some sort of embodied relation to the painting. Instead, the underground conduits in this painting propose themselves as *technical* representations of some sort of movement or process over which viewer presides, as a detached eyewitness, rather than as a body located in some kind of relative, contiguous spatial arrangement. As such, the addition of a second canvas panel begins a more complex diagrammatic vision in the painting.

With its roots in the visual language of science and industry, a diagram’s putative function is to transparently or legibly communicate or express meaning. However, Halley’s diagrammatic paintings do not communicate any kind of clear meaning to their viewer. A work like *Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber* (1983), for example, exhibits neither representational transparency nor legibility. By appearing as diagrams, but withholding their meaning, Halley’s paintings of networks actively thwart or de-realise coherence, in doing so amplifying their own ambiguity or mystery as diagrammatic images. While *Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber* plays with ideas of visual mastery, or notions of vision yoked to some order of total knowledge, it is difficult to grasp what a viewer might actually learn from this painting. In
particular, it is hard to imagine what this work might help us understand about the kind of advanced capitalist technological networks it aspires to represent?

To be clear, the idea that the abstract, minimalist aesthetic of Halley’s paintings could successfully represent the systems at work in contemporary network capitalism—the complexity of a fully wired-up trading floor, for example, its myriad of telephone and computer connections, its screens, and its connection to real lives, and to mortgage judgements, policies, banks, legal systems, etc.—is, of course, absurd. While this is the kind of complexity we mean when we discuss financial networks, it is not something that can be captured in a simplistic painting featuring squares and lines. However, this way of viewing representation—in terms of correlation; as a kind of mirror held up to reality, or a photographic image made of it—is clearly not the form of representation at work in this painting. Rather, it is the very simplicity of these paintings, their failure to properly represent the fibrillating complexity of new forms of networked capitalism, that, I would argue successfully expresses something of the unbridgeable void between individual experience and the vast “underworld” of advanced capitalism’s shadow financial networks. As Michael Auping has observed, Halley’s underground conduits ‘circumscribe an invisible [my italics] labyrinth of power and communication’. 36 We should therefore not view Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber as a representation of global electronic markets, but, rather, as a representation of the unrepresentability of such markets.

In reducing an image of advanced technological networks down to the most basic relationships between elementary geometric forms—squares and lines—and in pitching

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36 Auping, Abstraction, Geometry, Painting, 89.
his paintings as diagrams, yet withholding captions, keys, or indexes, Halley’s paintings can therefore be read as reflexively engaging the very problem of representation particular to capitalism. Indeed, Halley’s paintings would seem to stunt their own representational capacities in a self-aware way, resulting in a difficulty or opacity that operates thematically in the work, as well as opening it up to a wide range of interpretative possibilities. In this sense, the stunting or suspension of meaning implicit in Halley’s paintings is a key aspect of the fecundity of Halley’s painting. Their very representational limitation appears to encourage or invite their viewers to “fill in the blanks”, as it were, to project their own historical content into Halley’s forms—as I have done in this chapter, and the previous one. Yoked to the aesthetic language of minimalist abstraction, we can say, therefore, that Halley’s clunky, reductive, and simplistic rendering of what is impossibly complex expresses the very problem taking place in human attempts to see or perceive of capitalism, the dominant aesthetic problem taking place at the level at which capitalism is mediated by normative human perception.

Taken together, Halley’s innovative use of support, and his basic motifs and artistic language, therefore *thematised* the ultimate unrepresentability of the new economic systems stirring beneath New York City in the early 1980s. In doing so, a work like *Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber*, along with other diagrammatic paintings from 1983 explored in this chapter, opened up a dialogue around the question regarding the *representability* of our representations of finance capitalism’s advanced technological networks.
The use of abstracted models of artistic representation to produce images with the power to confront and partially dissolve capitalism’s own mystified appearances, capitalism’s own abstraction, is one way to understand Jameson’s concept of the cognitive map that I introduced in Chapter One. Faced with what he describes as ‘that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole’, cognitive mapping eschews forms of correlative representation grounded in notions of locational transparency. As Jameson dryly writes,

Since everyone knows what a map is, it would have been necessary to add that cognitive mapping cannot (at least in our time) involve anything so easy as a map; indeed, once you knew what “cognitive mapping” was driving at, you were to dismiss all figures of maps and mapping from your mind and try and imagine something else.\(^37\)

In line with Jameson’s idea of eschewing accuracy or resemblance, Halley’s representational method constitutes a model of abstraction in which limitations in our ability to see or perceive capitalism are themselves made visible. We can say, therefore, that these paintings are useful, instructive kinds of failures that successfully occupy a revealing intersection between the will, or ambition, to map the limitations of human perception or vision, and the invisibility or opacity of the economy at this historical juncture.

We can speak of further success here, too: an art historical one. For we might say that these paintings succeed in their project to alter or transform the project of

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minimalist geometric abstraction. Halley’s paintings can be understood as a successful address to the yoking of a late-modernist system of abstraction to a changed historical circumstance, a situation in which, suddenly, new problems had become salient, problems of connection and relationship specific to the new economic horizon that became apparent at the dawn of the late-capitalist moment in the 1980s. A work like Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber hones the project of abstraction, developing it in new ways, while succeeding in the formal terms of that painterly language as well (this is a powerful, visually compelling, and impactful painting; a painting with presence, to coin critic Michael Fried’s formalist term). In short, as this work demonstrates, in his ambition to represent the clandestine technological networks of late-capitalism, Halley reimagines what minimalist abstract can say or do. In this sense, Halley manages to move the language of abstraction forward.

My analysis so far has explored Halley’s painting in terms of the structural logic of the networks facilitating global electronic markets. And yet, as Knorr Cetina observes, emphasis on network systems gives short shrift to what she describes as ‘the actual realization’ of networks in specific technological devices. As Knorr Cetina makes clear, ‘the notion of technology as an external artefact or infrastructure for information exchange distracts from the world constitutive role of a particular component of this technology, the screen’. Accordingly, in what follows, I shift my attention from shadow networks that thwart our attempts to represent them, to the question of how to represent increasingly ubiquitous screen technologies. Taking my cue from Knorr Cetina’s framing of technological screens as ‘an array of crystals [that act] as lenses that collect light, focusing it at one point’, I use the notion of the screen as a light producing device to
explore the specific quality of synthetic light generated by Halley’s use of Day-glo paint. I propose that the quality of light emitted by the type of Day-glo colour Halley uses in his paintings captures something of the distortive, transfixing quality of different forms of technological light connected to screen technologies.

To commence this line of thought, I first outline how Halley used Day-glo in a number of key paintings from the early to mid-1980s. I then trace the roots of Halley’s use of Day-glo paint in past art by introducing the different ways forms of intensive colour were used in 1950s and 1960s abstraction. From here I build a number of connections between the type of light emitted by Day-glo and the increasingly prominent technological and media culture of the 1980s.

3.3 Screen Light

In the early months of 1981, Halley had begun experimenting with phosphorescent acrylic paint. Phosphorescent (from Ancient Greek: φῶς (phôs, “light”) + φέρω (phérō, “to bear, carry”)) paint is a type of luminous paint commonly known as “glow in the dark” paint. Chemicals added to the paint, such as doped strontium illuminate or silver-activated zinc sulfide, take UV radiation from day-light or synthetic light sources, absorb it, then emit that energy as a longer wavelength of visible light that persists for a number of hours. Phosphorescent paint of the sort Halley was using in 1981 appears pale yellow-green in daylight, and will “glow” with a pale green-blue colour for a number of hours in the dark, gradually fading over time.38

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Halley first used phosphorescent paint in *The Golden Age* (1981) (Figure 3.11). Measuring 76 x 152cm, this rectangular painting appears to be a spare abstraction composed of two elements: a thin strip or band in royal blue acrylic running along the top of the canvas, and a large block of white acrylic mixed with Roll-a-Tex taking up the remainder of the picture’s surface. However, faintly visible on the surface of this textured monochrome block are smudgy, broken orbits of expressionistically applied phosphorescent acrylic—lines or trails not unreminiscent of Pollock’s skeins of dripped or poured paint—that whirl and turn chaotically; an effect only really apparent when the lights are switched off and the painting begins to emit its luminescent charge. The effect of seeing this painting in the dark is of an inchoate energetic force or potential stirring within Halley’s painting. And to say that this new energetic presence in the painting was a problem in need of a different pictorial solution—one, perhaps, less reliant on the theatrics of gallery lights being switched on and off—is one way to approach Halley’s shift from using phosphorescent paint to Day-glo paint in 1981.

Invented by Switzer Corp. in the early 1940s, Day-glo paint was originally taken up by the American military and used extensively in World War II (U.S. ground troops used Day-glo panels to ward off friendly fire, for example). After the war, Day-glo came into commercial use, adopted by a number of companies—most famously Tide, a popular brand of detergent—as a way of making products more enticing to the consumer. Day-glo was also popular in so-called “psychedelic art”, the “tripping” mind drawn to its radiating brightness.

Halley first introduced Day-glo paint in *Prison with Conduit* (1981) (Figure 3.8). Occupying the lower third of the canvas, below the white Roll-a-Tex surface of the
upper canvas panel with its embedded prison window icon, Halley positioned a second
Day-glo red canvas panel through which passes a black acrylic conduit. Through the
rest of 1981, Halley largely remained faithful to Day-glo red, using only one other colour
in the Day-glo range, fluorescent chartreuse, to detail the ‘illuminated’ windows on a
painting of an apartment building, in *Apartment House* (1981). With *Day-Glo Prison*
(1982) (Figure 3.12) however, with its abrasive Day-glo red prison building set against a
glowing Day-glo orange background, Halley began combining multiple Day-glo colours
in single paintings. Alternatively, in works like *Glowing and Burnt Out Cells with Conduit*
(1982) and *Yellow and Black Cells with Conduit* (1985) (Figures 3.13–3.14) amongst
others, Halley establishes a binary tension in the space of the painting by using black in
combination with a single Day-glo colour. In works like *Blue Cell with Smokestack*
(1984) (Figure 3.15) (part of a Picasso-esque all Day-glo “blue period” at the end of
1983 and the beginning of 1984) and *Yellow Cell with Smokestack* (1984) (Figure 3.16),
an all-black, night-like background contains a free-standing Day-Glo cell form. This is
reversed in a painting like *Rectangular Prison with Smokestack* (1987) (Figure 3.17),
with Day-glo yellow and orange being used, respectively, to sharpen the visual impact
of geometrically hard-edged architectural forms.

Halley has offered the following explanations for his decisive turn towards Day-glo
colour in 1981:

> I was interested in taking materials from the commercial [and]
technological realm. Day-glo paint seemed to me to be a way of
creating a real, artificial, technological light very different from any kind of natural light.\textsuperscript{39}

As with his use of Roll-a-Tex, the central idea here would appear to be a matter of snatching some small parcel of lived experience particular to highly commodified and technologised urban worlds and bringing it into the painting. While Roll-a-Tex brought a sense of urban architectural surface to the painting, Day-glo offered the work a means of exploring what critic Jeff Rian described as the ‘electro-fluorescence’ of postwar American culture: ‘the wardrobe of a southern golfer, polyester, the colours of candy wrappers, cigarette ads, Popsicles, cars, marking pens, Smurfs, fast-food chain interiors, and student’s lemon and lime highlighters’.\textsuperscript{40}

Halley has also cited the light of past abstractions as a determining factor in his own approach to producing luminescent paintings. As he explained in 2009:

\begin{quote}
With artists like Rothko and Newman and the painters and sculptors of the 60s, light was very much part of the conversation. I grew up with the notion that paintings create light, that picturing light was really important. As my work developed, I wanted to make paintings that created light, not natural light, but an artificial light. One usually thinks of a divine or sublime force as dazzling. So, if it’s artificial light that dazzles, it’s a little perverse in a way that I like.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{39} ‘Peter Halley Public Talk at Garage Museum, Moscow’.
\textsuperscript{40} Jeff Rian, ‘Peter Halley Makes a Move,’ \textit{Flash Art}, October 1995, 90.
\textsuperscript{41} de Jongh, ‘Peter Halley’. 
Another reference point here is Frank Stella. In the early 1960s Stella began experimenting with different types of industrial paint in his large-scale geometric abstractions. This interest in industrial, rather than fine, art materials began with his use of domestic enamel paint in his *Black Paintings* of 1958 to 1960. And it continued with his use of different shades of industrial metallic paint in his *Aluminium Paintings* of 1960, the *Copper Paintings* of 1960 to 1961, and the *Purple Paintings* of 1963. In 1964, Stella began a series of works called the *Moroccan Paintings*. Named after cities in Morocco, these works marked the first time Stella used fluorescent Day-glo alkyd colour in his paintings. In *Fez II* (1964) (Figure 3.18), a square painting is divided up into four equilateral square sections. Each of these sections features crisply rendered bands of Day-glo alkyd in alternative colours, either fluorescent green or yellow. Stella continued to use Day-glo in his painting through the 1960s, most notably in his 1965 series *Irregular Polygons*.

Other abstract artists who began using Day-glo colour in their art during the 1960s include Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. Judd began using fluorescent Plexiglas in his wall and floor works during the late 1960s. A wall work like *Untitled* (1968) (Figure 3.19), for example, features pink fluorescent Plexiglas sheets inset into a segmented column composed of ten brass boxes. Using fluorescent lighting tubes in five colours (red, yellow, blue and green, as well as plain or “white”), Dan Flavin also pioneered the use of highly charged colour in his 1960s work (Figure 3.20). Speaking to Kathryn Hixon in 1991, Halley, naming both Judd and Flavin, noted that: ‘there are various artists since
the ‘60s who have been very concerned with capturing a certain kind of alienating bizarre industrial light’.\textsuperscript{42}

Though not cited directly by Halley, we might also compare this interest in forms of potent, light-emitting paint with Josef Albers’s use of colour (Figure 3.21). While Albers did not use Day-glo in his paintings, he did take a profound interest in direct and pronounced uses of colour in painting that confront the viewer in various ways through their potent, projectile presence. As critic Margit Rowell wrote in \textit{Artforum} in 1972, ‘Albers’s color has no direction except out, toward the viewer’, ‘[his] volumes of color-light assault us and solicit our response’.\textsuperscript{43} In that article Rowell also writes of an experience Albers had at the 1913 \textit{Herbstsalon} in Berlin when viewing Edvard Munch’s luminous painting \textit{The Sun} (1911) (Figure 3.22):

It was a huge painting. It overwhelmed me. There was such terrific glow that you couldn’t look unto that sun. It was so overwhelming that it put me on my knees. That is one of the greatest experiences I have ever had in modern painting.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[42]Hixson, ‘Interview’.
\item[44]Rowell, ‘On Albers’ Color’. The basis of Albers’s account of seeing Munch’s painting at the Berlin 1913 \textit{Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon} is an interview conducted by Rowell with Albers that is listed as taking place on 14 April 1971. However, it should be noted that Munch did not participate in the 1913 \textit{Herbstsalon} exhibition (as clearly demonstrated by his absence from the catalogue accompanying the exhibition. See \textit{Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon}, (Berlin: Der Sturm, 1913). However, as art historian Jan Torsten Ahlstrand notes, running concurrently with the \textit{Herbstsalon} was an "anti-exhibition" organised at the art dealer Paul Cassirer’s gallery on the Kurfürstendamm. This exhibition included works by Munch, as well as other artists missing from the \textit{Herbstsalon}, including Picasso and the \textit{Die Brücke} group. And so, it’s possible Albers saw \textit{The Sun} at Cassirer’s gallery in 1913. See Jan Torsten Ahlstrand, ‘Berlin and the Swedish Avant-Garde – GAN, Nell Walden, Viking Eggeling, Axel Olson, and Bengt Osterblom’ \textit{Monoskop} (15 December 2012), accessed 6 June 2022, https://monoskop.org/images/9/9b/Ahlstrand_Jan_Torsten_2012_Berlin_and_the_Swedish_Avant-Garde_GAN_Nell_Walden_Viking_Eggeling_Axel_Olson_and_Bengt_Osterblom.pdf.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Working in an era in which electrification was rapidly spreading across Europe, one might speculate that what is captured in Munch’s painting is the light of early-20th-century urban electricification. In contrast, I want to propose that Halley’s use of fluorescent Day-glo is a gesture that aims to emphasise the ‘artificial, unnatural and eerie’ qualities and ‘alienating bizarre industrial light’ of more advanced technologies, namely, the invasive, distortive technological glow of new forms of screen-based technology. While in no way immersive to the degree of today’s world, I want to propose that, in picking up on the use of Day-glo in past art, Halley was both reflecting the increasing prominence of screen-based technologies in the 1980s, while also somehow anticipating or prefiguring how, in the decades following the 1980s, screen-based media would come to dominate our everyday lives. To begin this analysis, I want to first demonstrate how Halley’s use of Day-glo operated in order to manipulate and disorientate the senses of the viewer in different ways. Following this, I will propose a number of links between the perceptual disturbance generated by the eerie light of Halley’s paintings, and the “hyperreality” of a world increasingly mediated by screen-based technologies and the content they communicate to us.

3.3.1 Day-glo Distortion

It is not difficult to associate Halley’s use of Day-glo colour with certain scientific or science-fictional representations of dangerous strange or alien substances that emit an eerie kind of glow; the green hum of kryptonite (Figure 3.23), for example, or the ominous blue light of the Cherenkov radiation emitted by nuclear waste stored under
metres of glowing water (Figure 3.24). This is to say, one way to frame Halley’s use of Day-glo paint is as an aposematic gesture. Aposematism (from Ancient Greek meaning “away” / “sign”) in nature indicates situations in which animals use prominent, at times brightly coloured markings on their coat or body to warn other animals of their toxicity, bad taste, or aggression. What aposematic communication establishes, through colour alone, is a set of codes that warn potential predators of the unprofitability of an attack. Aposematism is, therefore, a type of advertising-signal: it forewarns of danger, expressing this visually.

Paradoxically, however much as Halley’s paintings seem to express this kind of repulsive semiosis, we might also read them as dragging us towards them—like moths attracted to some humming psychedelic element. In certain works, this alluring or seductive visual effect is optimised through maximum hue contrast between the various elements in the picture. In Two Cells with Circulating Conduit (1985) (Figure 3.25), for example, this is achieved by juxtaposing two adjacent cell forms, both painted in an almost nauseating tone of Day-glo chartreuse, with an abyssal black background. In a later work adopting the same pictorial arrangement, also titled Two Cells with Circulating Conduit (1986) (Figure 3.26), this effect is inverted: two black cells appearing like orthogonal punctures in a field of irradiated yellow that pulses with an alluring kind of visual heat. Full of affective charge, the intoxicating experience of viewing one of these paintings—which, at 1.5 x 2.5m respectively, are large enough to completely absorb their viewer—comprises an exhilarating encounter with colour. But this is an encounter that soon tips over into a kind of nervous, angular anxiety, as your eyes begin to burn, and your vision warps, in the face of such electric fluorescence.
Halley has stated that he creates optical tensions between ‘background and form’ in order to create a form of ‘spatial ambiguity’ in his paintings that he describes as generating experiences of ‘psychedelic overload’ in the viewer.⁴⁵ To view these paintings is, therefore, an almost hallucinatory experience that invokes Day-glo’s original use in psychedelic art of the 1960s in order to generate similar, disorientating, and mind-expanding experiences in the viewer. Born in the mid-1950s, Halley experienced the later years of the 1960s as a young adult, and, as Jeff Rian has observed, his use of colour seems to come to us ‘through the bong-pipe of paranoid psychedelic subculture’—late-1960s artefacts such as Robert Crumb’s Zap Comix, or example (Figure 3.27), which abounds with searing Day-glo colours and brain-melting cartoon imagery.⁴⁶

Picking up on this mind-bending aspect, writing about ‘Paravision’ in the November 1985 edition of Artforum, an exhibition curated by Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo at Postmasters Gallery, New York, in 1985 which included Halley’s Yellow Prison with Underground Conduit (1985) (Figure 3.28), critic Carlo McCormack observed that:

The act of psychedelic, optical distortion as a language and process of expanding the bounds of reality and experience was located as a visual and conceptual concern of contemporary art. The psychedelic option guarantees a perceptual difficulty that opposes the easy digestibility of image and idea common in the arts today.⁴⁷

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⁴⁵ Hixson, ‘Interview’.
⁴⁶ Rian, ‘Peter Halley Makes a Move’.
As suggested by McCormack, psychedelic visual disturbances of the sort generated by Halley’s use of Day-glo result in pictures that challenge and unsettle our perception.

In this way, the quality and intensity of the light emitted by Halley’s Day-glo paintings pushes back against foundational Western philosophical conceptions of light. As curator Christiane Paul explains, one can ‘argue that presence, being, ontology, rational knowledge, enlightenment, epistemology, etc., at least on some level, are all tied to notions of light’. However, the kind of light emitted by Halley’s paintings does not operate as a metaphor or emblem for truth, knowledge, and understanding, but rather, its opposite—a certain distortion of truth.

Holding this, and the technological context of Halley’s work in mind, I want to now build a chain of connection between the somehow unreal, perception-disturbing, and experience-distorting colour and light of Halley’s paintings, and what we might call the hypereality of life in 1980s America—a moment in which new technologies and communication systems seemed to take hold of social reality, blurring and distorting it in different ways.

Media theorist Douglas Kellner has argued that, by the 1980s, America had entered a new era in which new technologies—media, cybernetic models and steering systems, computers, information processing, entertainment and knowledge industries and so-forth—replace industrial production and political economy as the organizing principle of society […] We [now] live in a “hypereality” of

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simulations in which images, spectacles and the play of signs replace the logic of production and class conflict as key constituents of contemporary capitalist society.⁴⁹

Reflecting Kellner’s point, we can say that by the 1980s media spectacle appeared to permeate every form of cultural life and social experience. Movies became bigger and more awesome than ever, with digital special effects radically expanding the range of cinematic spectacle. For the first time, TV channels relentlessly circulated all-day news, political talk, films, specialty sports shows, repeats. The incipient media economy of 1980s America deployed spectacle as a way to seduce consumers through increasingly desire-driven advertising campaigns. Media culture also came to proliferate ever more elaborate spectacles to attract viewers and increase the power and benefit of the major corporations generating content. Social and political tensions were increasingly being played out in popular culture, with spectacles like sensational murder cases, terrorist bombings, celebrity and political sex scandals, and daily life’s explosive violence providing yet more content to distract and seduce viewers. Indeed, by the 1980s, forms of entertainment had come to saturate news and information. This was true for politics too, a tabloidised infotainment culture becoming increasingly present on the American political stage, as evidenced by the election of former movie star Ronald Reagan to the White House between 1981 and 1989.

This is a context Halley himself observed in a short text from 1985, Notes on Nostalgia:

History becomes entertainment and entertainment become history. There are TV docu-dramas, and there are the Academy Awards. There is 60 Minutes, and there is the Baseball Hall of Fame. There is the traditional Christian calendar year 1984, and there is Super Bowl XVIII [...] Reagan wins because he runs as John Wayne. Reagan holds out to us a return to the time when men rode horses, chopped wood and owned ranches (though in this case the ranch is in the heart of Southern California).

Halley’s writing between 1983 and 1986 is filled with similar allusions to this new, simulated, network reality. In ‘Nature and Culture’ (1983), originally published in the September 1983 edition of Arts Magazine, Halley describes the dissolution of concepts of nature and the natural in favour of a synthetic and simulated conception of social reality in which ‘the crucial powers that were assigned to nature’s dominion’ have been transferred to technological and scientific operations. And in ‘The Crisis in Geometry’ (1984), he speaks of a society that has become ‘weightless […] no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference of circumference’.

As these texts demonstrate, Halley was attuned to an increasing sense of social disorientation in American life, as social reality was increasingly shaped or determined by new, reality warping media spectacles distributed on a global scale via new networks.

of communication. This new hypereality registered as a gaping incompatibility between situated bodies and rapidly circulated media content that shaped and structured their experience. As a result, the 1980s threw up new challenges regarding how individuals and collectives might locate themselves, how they might identify their specific place in this strange new virtual landscape or infosphere. What the hyper-reality of late-capitalism throws up, then, is a profound problem of orientation: the incapacity of humans to map their own position with the vast multinational and decentred communicable networks that had, via new technologies, rapidly enclosed social reality.

However extensive and disorientating these networks might be, it’s important to bear in mind Knorr Cetina’s point that it is on technological screens—computer monitors, television and cinema screens, and, more recently, the screens of devices such as smart phones—that this decentred communicational network becomes centred for human experience. The phenomenological experience of viewing a screen, the encounter between the human body and glowing technological surface, thus amounts to the moment or point at which we are directly apprehended by late-capitalist or postmodern hyperreality. While Knoor Cetina emphasises that ‘the microelectronic scaffold behind [this] surface should not be ignored’, ‘nor should the secondary information supply economy that feeds the screen windows’, she nonetheless emphasises the fact that these ‘feeding and sustaining factors’ converge on the screen—a ‘wired, programmed, and content filled, textually elaborated surface’ that fascinates through its ability to frame and present a world’.  

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Returning to the paintings, holding in mind Halley's idea that Day-glo colour might allow his painting to glow in an ‘artificial, unnatural, and eerie’ way comparable to some sort of ‘alienating bizarre industrial light’, one way to understand the glow of Halley’s paintings is, therefore, in terms of the screens that mediate our access to the new, strange, and disorientating world of hypereality. The synthetic, technological quality of light emitted by screens is not only suggested by the glow of Halley’s electrified colour, but somehow also made more present and impactful by being extracted and captured in static form in solid blocks of Day-glo paint. In this way Halley’s Day-glo saturated paintings both thematise and actualise the experience of subjective disorientation generated by exposure to the technological hyperreality communicated to us via screens technologies.

To be clear, the 1980s were by no means the fully immersive or saturating technological experience of today’s world. In a certain sense, Halley’s use of Day-glo painting does something like precognise or prefigure the more integrated technological situation that unfolded in the decades after the 1980s. Expressed, somehow, in the ambient glow of Halley’s paintings of the 1980s was an image of a future to come. This is a future described, a decade later, in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996)—a novel in which an experimental art film (titled *Infinite Jest* or ‘The Entertainment’) becomes so absorbing to viewers that they die from thirst and malnourishment in front of the screen, unable to take their eyes away from its glowing presence. It is also the

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54 Hixson, ‘Interview with Peter Halley’.
future of our present moment, a time in which the screen glow of personal computers and smartphones hooked up to the internet is an omnipresent phenomena.

In a 2016 interview, Halley commented on this connection directly, linking the use of Day-glo in 1960s abstraction to the kind of light emitted by smart phones:

There were a few artists using fluorescent color—Warhol, Stella—but at the beginning of the 1980s, at the beginning of what I consider to be the ‘digital era’ our world was getting more electronic, more colorful, more intense. And it really seemed to be that fluorescent color was the way to express that [...] I wanted my paintings to have the light of technology [...] It’s absolutely true that [...] my work has become more popular with people since the iPhone came along [...] There’s something about the idea of glowing, something that generates light [...] that seems to appeal to humans.56

Philosopher Esther Leslie has written extensively about the glowing light of advanced technological screens and the hold these screens have on our attention and experience:

Screens are everywhere. They saturate the environment. We carry little ones in our pockets. We see large ones on exterior walls. The liquid crystals inside their black boxes reside more or less comfortably in our bags, on our desks, on our ovens, fridges, car dashboards. We fall asleep to their flicker or their seepage of light on small screens in bedrooms. They are caught behind glass,

56 Peter Halley, ‘Artist Talk’.
yet they demand to be touched. The screens’ liveliness comes to replace ours as we sink into couches or slump on office chairs, bathed in a phosphorescent glow. They glimmer at us. Walking into a library, a café, a railway carriage, the reader-writers sit in ranks, gazing at an upright screen, its whitish-green-blue illumination lighting up their face. The screen reflects on the faces of those rapt in its glare. On public transport, the screen diverts the eyes that would otherwise be averted. Each human for him or herself, bathing in the emitted light of the screen, is suffused with a glaucous aquatic gleam. We are returned to the phosphorescent oceans from which we once came, from which we once began to take on form and form our thoughts.  

Leslie notes the paradox of these screens, something I have earlier attributed to the colour of Halley’s paintings also, that they both attract and repel us. On the one hand, as the liquid crystal screens in our devices glow, they exude the strange ‘attracting power’. And yet, on the other hand, this ‘phosphor-fluorescence remains a signal of something odd, unknown, future-orientated. Its hues do not seem contained in the rainbow, but are rather a property of our machines and laboratories, apparently alien to us’. Thus we are simultaneously drawn towards and alienated from these new strange new technologies, and the content they communicate.

Leslie also writes of the disorientating colonisation of everyday experience by the glowing power of these new technologies:

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Now we have cracked open time. There is no stillness, expect for when we command it. The screen makes all history flow [...] Space is overcome in composite themes. Time is redoubled so that capitalism can communicate with us, constantly and from every angle. It is time for the whole world to be remodelled through liquid crystals [...] The cities glow. The city is something we log onto. And the screens will become conveyors of time, in its deepest sense, in the mode that makes sense to us: we will measure our age in iPhone generations.59

In many ways Halley’s use of Day-glo colour is a symbol of this reconstruction of the world around screen technologies—a process in its germinal stages in the 1980s, but which, today, seems advanced in its development. And it would seem that embedded in this situation is a tension or dilemma. However much our exposure to the glowing light of data-carrying screens gives us access to vast amounts of information, these screens also rob us of orientation or grounding in the world. What is by any measure the excess of glowing screens in our everyday lives is, therefore, reminiscent of a line by Walter Benjamin from another time: ‘overabundance of light produces multiple blindings’.60 As we are picked up and transported across data dense virtual landscapes, we risk losing connection with the physical spaces and worlds we occupy. Inasmuch as Halley’s paintings appear to both pull us close and push us away with their Day-glo light, this is a contradiction that clues us to a bigger tension in late-capitalist life: our simultaneous seduction and alienation by technologies that now dominate our lives.

59 Leslie, Liquid Crystals, 234.
3.4 Frames of Opacity

The problematic I have explored in this chapter can be framed in the following way. With regards to Halley’s introduction of conduits and a second canvas panel into the painting, he presents works engaged with the problem of trying to make complex computer network systems somehow visible. And while I observed the ultimate futility of this task—the impossibility of representing the complexity of network technologies—Halley does succeed in making visible some sense of the opacity of these emergent techno-capitalist systems. Concerning Halley’s use of Day-glo acrylic paint, this results in works that are, essentially, hard to look at—paintings that transfix, blind, and disorientate us. The paintings I have explored in this chapter therefore capture a particular visual contradiction between on the one hand the desire to see and know what is real, and, on the other, the obstruction or impediment of that desire.

Halley thus constructs an embodied, which is to say, aesthetic encounter with two frames of opacity. He induces us into a critical, if not even mildly paranoiac, mindset compelled by will to look carefully and judiciously at capitalism’s new technological networks and the functions they serve in the economy. And he exposes us to painted surfaces that, quite literally, have a mesmerising and blinding effect on our senses. It should be noted that these impulses—looking carefully / being blinded—often take place simultaneously, in individual paintings. Thus there is a unified experience of contradiction at work in Halley’s paintings, an imminent, instant experience of impossibly complex social tensions linked to a new, highly technologised economic paradigm. In this way, tensions taking place on the surface of Halley’s paintings can clue us into tensions at work in the new economic system taking shape in 1980s New
York as the city emerged from a state of crisis into a new mode of production driven by the opacity of finance, and rendered hyperreal by a manic media environment distributed across increasingly prominent screen technologies.

What emerges from Halley’s glowing paintings of network systems is, therefore, a critique of technological appearances. What is undermined in the paintings I have explored in this chapter is the kind of technological utopianism with which network technology is often still associated. By emphasising the privacy and opacity of new forms of communication and connectivity over any kind of “open” or transparent rhetoric, and by demonstrating how we have been induced into a new, thoroughly distorted hyperreality through screen technologies, these paintings indicate the subsumption of the utopian and countercultural moment that birthed computing in the 1960s to the dominant logic of a new, fully globalised, and networked economy.

With this reading, I draw my visual analysis of the paintings to an end. Ending here reflects the fact that in the later years of the 1980s, and beyond, Halley’s work no longer developed along the kind of closely observed didactic lines I have traced in this thesis. As Halley explained to Kathryn Hixon in 1991,

> I decided that I was bored with working with a didactic vocabulary […]. I wanted to see, if by operating in a non-didactic manner, I could create a space and light that was more intense than that which I had created by sticking to a didactic program.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{61}\) Hixson, ‘Interview’. 
This resulted in Halley taking a more playful approach in his work, and in paintings that experimented—in different, less theoretically or socially charged ways—with the artistic vocabulary developed earlier in the 1980s.

Having conducted an extensive analysis of Halley’s work between 1980 and 1987, I want to now draw together the different readings I have outlined in this and the previous chapter before finalising my argument about the criticality of Halley’s postmodernist method of abstraction.

Figure 3.2. Toru Iwantani / Namco *Pac-Mac* (1980). *Namco arcade machine*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pac-Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pac-Man)
Figure 3.3. Tomohiro Nishikado / Taito. Space Invaders (1978). Atari 8-bit game cartridge. https://tropedia.fandom.com/wiki/Space_Invaders

Figure 3.4. TIME Magazine, 3 January 1983. https://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19830103,00.html


Figure 3.10. Ellsworth Kelly (1971). *Chatham XII Yellow Black*. Oil on canvas, two joined panels, 84 x 76 inches. Private Collection. https://ellsworthkelly.org/work/chatham-xii-yellow-black/


Figure 3.18. Frank Stella (1964) *Fez II*. Fluorescent alkyd on canvas, 195.6 x 195.6cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York City. https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80178

Figure 3.20. Dan Flavin (1963). *Pink Out Of A Corner (to Jasper Johns)*. Fluorescent light and metal fixture, 243.8 x 15.2 x 13.6cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York City. 

Figure 3.22. Edvard Munch (1911). *The Sun*. Oil on canvas. University of Oslo, Oslo. https://uk.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Файл:Solen_av_Edvard_Munch.jpg

Figure 3.24. Cherenkov radiation glowing in the core of the Advanced Test Reactor, Idaho National Laboratory. 8 April 2009. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cherenkov_radiation


Figure 3.27. Robert Crumb (1967). Zap Comix. Issue 0. https://www.abebooks.co.uk/ZAP-COMIX-NO.0-Crumb-R-Apex/30424024067/bd
CONCLUSION

Postmodernist Abstraction as Critical Art

In February 1987, art-activist collective Group Material organised an exhibition at New York non-profit gallery, White Columns. Titled ‘Resistance: Anti-Baudrillard’, the exhibition featured most of the key tenets of a collective curatorial practice honed over the years since the group was founded in New York in 1979. As was Group Material’s tendency at this time, artworks were organised in a busy, salon-style hang that crammed the walls of White Columns (Figures 4.1–4.3). Included were socially charged “brick” paintings by Martin Wong; John Heartfield’s famous “x-ray” photo-montage of Adolf Hitler, *Adolf, the Superman, Swallows Gold and Spouts Tin* (1932); watercolours by Margaret Harrison exploring issues of common land in early industrial Britain; and a visceral torture scene from Leon Golub’s paintings of South Africa. As the press release of the exhibition stated, this was a display that depicted an ‘undeniable political reality’ while forming ‘a picture of widespread, international resistance’. ‘This resistance’, continued the text, ‘denies the self-indulgence of leisure-class theory. It is resistance born from necessity and genuine day to day existence’. 62

While not one of the exhibiting artists, Halley was invited to participate in a roundtable accompanying the exhibition. This discussion featured other artists, such as Judith Barry, Oliver Wasow, William Olander, Julie Wachtel and, representing Group

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Material, Doug Ashford and Julie Ault. While the putative context of the roundtable was Group Material’s perception that the writings of certain theorists, in particular Baudrillard, had become a damagingly a-political influence on the New York art world, a clear question emerges from the discussion: in what way can art function as a tool for political “resistance”? 

Half way through the discussion Halley demurs from the idea of ‘resistance’ central to Group Material’s socially engaged model of political art, asking the assembled group of artists ‘what scenario could be created by a traditionally resistant culture to effect change?’, before adding, ‘I don’t see any scenario that would succeed, I would see it as resulting in reification on the part of the media and the economic system’. In opposition to the idea of ‘a traditionally resistant culture’, Halley then posits an alternative view:

I think from the point of view of resistance and dissatisfaction with what exists, anybody would honestly have to say that a person in that position has their backs to the wall […] it’s not exactly going so well. I think the issue of resistance […] has to be put aside in favour of the issue of understanding, and that would be the first step back […] or forward.  

I want to suggest that we take Halley’s words here regarding political understanding as emblematic of the critical logic of his postmodernist abstractions. While eschewing more traditional forms of political expression, my claim for these paintings is that they

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63 White Columns, ‘Resistance: Anti-Baudrillard’.  
64 White Columns, ‘Resistance: Anti-Baudrillard’.  

nonetheless retain a kind of criticality—a specific kind of postmodernist criticality—that is bound up with their ambition to see and observe capitalism and, in doing so, attempt to understand it.

In this sense we can read Halley’s art as actively redefining what artistic critique might look like or mean in postmodernist terms, an undertaking that places his art at the very centre of period debates about the critical stakes of postmodernist art. As Andreas Huyssen observed in his 1984 essay ‘Mapping the Postmodern’, ‘familiar ideas’ that constitute the modernist conventions of adversarial or critical art—whether political art, or ‘Parteilichkeit and vanguardism, l’art engagé, critical realism’ on the one hand, or ‘the aesthetic of negativity, the refusal of representation, abstraction, reflexiveness’ on the other—had ‘lost much of their explanatory power’ by the 1980s. With neither of these models adequate to postmodernist artistic practices, the question or dilemma hanging over postmodernist art, for Huyssen, regarded how postmodernist artistic practices could develop new critical models for engaging with the contemporary moment—a task that would involve redefining ‘the possibilities of critique in postmodern terms’. Rather than ‘relegating [postmodernism] to oblivion’, as so many critics and historians had already done, Huyssen argued that it was necessary to identify artworks that ‘unlock the critical moment in postmodernism itself’. 65

What I have proposed in this thesis is that Halley’s postmodernist paintings of the 1980s demonstrate one way in which the critical possibility in postmodernist art was indeed unlocked. The task of this conclusion, then, is to finalise and clarify this reading. To do this, first I will resolve a line of thought that runs throughout this thesis concerning

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the way in which Halley's postmodernist abstractions illuminate economically mediated aspects of the forms of minimalist geometric abstraction that have not been widely seen or referenced. I will propose that this illumination helps us understand, in critical ways, the idea that abstract artistic form is always already somehow socially mediated.

Second, reciprocally, I will finalise my arguments regarding ways in which it might be said that Halley's paintings of the 1980s represent capitalism. I will demonstrate the various levels at which Halley's representation of capitalism operates, considering first his depiction of localised capitalist effects specific to New York City at this turbulent moment of economic, political, and social change, and second, his engagement with the broader historical or periodising dynamic between an exhausted industrial mode of production and an emerging post-industrial regime. As I emphasise throughout this reading, what is at stake in Halley's art is the critical question of the aesthetic figurability or representability of capitalism itself.

In the following pages I unpack these closely connected points in more detail in order to make my final case that Halley's postmodernist abstractions attained the status of a kind of critical art during the 1980s: a model of abstract painting that could fairly claim to foster critical thought and understanding.

4.1 Illuminating Minimalist Abstraction

The self-reflexive, parodic art of the postmodern [underlines] in its ironic way the realization that all cultural forms of representation—literary, visual, aural—in high art or the mass media […] cannot
avoid involvement with social and political relations and apparatuses.\textsuperscript{66}

Throughout this thesis I have emphasised how Halley used of tropes drawn from the tradition of minimalist geometric abstraction to build an artistic language that connects with and makes visible or legible a range of socio-economic conditions. What I want to now explore is ways in which this postmodernist method prompts us to look at forms of historical abstract art otherwise understood to be explicitly non-representational through a new social lens. As Halley makes clear in a number of his interviews, as he was establishing his artistic vocabulary in the early 1980s he struggled with the idea that minimalist forms were “abstract”, in the Greenbergian sense of being self-referentially autonomous artistic forms. As he explained in 1991:

I was never able to accept that people like Judd and Stella were that abstract. Especially Judd. I always saw his work as boxes coming out of the factory. In some ways it seems a naive investment of meaning, but it did feel liberating to say that a square isn’t just a square, it can be a prison. It can be something literal; it connotes something.\textsuperscript{67}

In a recent oral history conducted for the Archives of American art, Halley has explained his position \textit{qua} the kinds of representational imagery he was seeking in the abstract work of artists such as Stella and Judd more extensively:

\textsuperscript{66} Hutcheon, \textit{The Politics of Postmodernism}, 3
\textsuperscript{67} Hixson, ‘Interview’.

I was trying to find—I don’t want to call them representational—but signifieds to a geometric signifier. What does geometry signify in a painting? And the idea that signifieds had multiple signifiers was something that was emerging in the thinking—in the books of Roland Barthes, and how any sign can—not just have one predetermined meaning, but will have many meanings built by the audience. But in my case, what I really wanted to do was take the language of minimalism and Neoplasticism—take it out of this realm of self-referentiality, and bring it back into the social world of architecture—well, I guess I’d call it built structures. So, to make a long story short, I took the modernist square […] put this stucco on it to make it feel three-dimensional on the canvas, and put bars in the middle, and said, “the square is now a prison for me. It’s no longer an idealist platonic shape, but rather an image of confinement.”

By illuminating the social potential of forms of minimalist geometric abstraction, Halley’s work reveals new possibilities for interpreting this model or genre of art—whether it’s a matter of past art, or work that came in the wake of Halley’s example.

In terms of past art, Halley’s approach to reading works of American abstract geometric art from the late 1950s and 1960s can be understood as making significant contribution to the discourse concerning the possible social mediation of works by Stella, Judd, and others. Indeed, we might say that Halley’s painting, supported by his writing and interviews, illuminates relatively underexplored aspects of minimalist art, generating something like a “shadow discourse” that pushes back against long-established theoretical understandings of minimalist art as formally self-enclosed or literal.

68 See Leddy, ‘Oral history’.
Of course such readings have been with us as long as minimalist art has been. Somewhat ironically, Clement Greenberg famously observed in 1967 that minimalist artworks might be read as everyday objects—‘a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper’—while also stating that the work of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre, amongst others, had yet to rise above what he describes as ‘good design’.69 In that same year, critic Harold Rosenberg made a similar point, proposing that while minimalist sculptures ‘clearly affirm the independent existence of the art object as meaningful in itself’, they also aim to ‘disguise themselves as ordinary objects’, attempting to ‘pass as machine or building parts’.70 We can even trace a kind of wavering on this issue from Judd himself. While otherwise hostile to representation, preferring ‘work that didn’t allude to other things and was a specific thing in itself’, in a 1965 interview with Bruce Hooten, Judd stated that he had ‘pretty strong reactions to what this country looks like,’ adding that America ‘looks pretty dull and spare’. As Judd concluded, somewhat ambivalently, ‘I don’t much like the idea of representing the United States in my work. It’s just that you live here and you are involved in your sense of what’s around you—your sense of what is ordinary’.71

More recently, a number of historians have also attempted to identify representational aspects and qualities to minimalist artistic form. I have already mentioned Hal Foster’s 1986 essay ‘The Crux of Minimalism’, in which he likened the serial logic of minimalist sculpture to the factory made objects rolling off the Fordist

production lines in the post-war hey days of American mass production. A more pointed reading, made by art historian Anna Chave in her 1990 essay ‘Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power’, identifies minimalist art with various structures of power, whether material or ideological. Another example comes from Caroline A. Jones, who, writing about Frank Stella in her *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (1996), describes his ‘hard-edged, flatly painted canvases’ of the early 1960s as serial productions rolling out of his studio ‘like nothing so much as gleaming “brand new” manufactured objects’. More recently articles by Charles Reeve (1992), Johnathan Flatley (2004), and Josiah McElheny (2004) have continued to ask the question of minimalist art’s social referentiality. And yet, as historian Joshua Shannon notes, when considering minimalist work like Judd’s the dominant art historical interpretation of minimalist form remains ‘intractably literalist’ in its logic. As such, Halley’s interpretation—developed, it should be noted, in the historical interstice between the 1960s readings cited above and a wave of reappraisals of minimalist form that commenced in the 1990s—takes on significant historical importance.

On the other hand, looking at the direction art took after the 1980s, we might say that Halley’s attempt to reflexively reveal ‘the veiled signifieds that the geometric sign may yield’, as he described it in ‘The Crisis in Geometry’ (1984), opened up a new set of representational possibilities for artists working in an abstract, minimalist geometric

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idiom. While I have argued that Halley’s work in particular, and the moment of New York Neo-geo art in general, remains frozen in historical parenthesis, I want to now explore one important historical trajectory that would appear to depart from these sources: that of the so called “Young British Artists” (YBAs) of the 1990s. By briefly speculating upon the impact of Halley’s Neo-geo abstraction of this group of British artists, I hope to underline the influence of the model of postmodernist abstraction developed by Halley in the 1980s. Following this brief historical excursion, I will make some theoretical points about the kind of dialectical conception of form that I think underpins Halley’s work, before moving on to explore ways that the paintings of the 1980s illuminated aspects of the abstraction of late-capitalist life in New York City.

For Hal Foster the end of the 1980s marked the decline of historically reflexive, semiotically, and intertextually complex art. Instead, Foster observed that the ‘emphatic turn to the bodily and the social, to the abject and the site-specific’ in the 1990s art of artists such as Kiki Smith, Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, was a shift from ‘a conventionalist regime where nothing is real’ to a decisive turn back to reality and an art of ‘trauma’ that represented humanity in the depths of its many complex identities.74 While the approach to past art, social history, and semiotic play epitomised by Halley’s paintings of the 1980s may have been eclipsed by this “return of the real”, tendencies towards new geometric art did live on after the 1980s—particularly in Europe. By looking at the art world in Europe during the 1990s, a case can be made that the particular model of geometric abstraction suggested by Halley’s painting became one of the dominant threads in the subsequent development of contemporary art through the

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1990s and beyond. Considering UK during the late-1980s and 1990s, an argument can be made that Halley’s pursuit of the social-logic of abstract geometric form established an important example to the YBAs—a generation born roughly a decade after Halley.

The possibility of a transatlantic confluence between an established American approach to art and an emerging British one can be examined by looking at the impact of a single exhibition, *NY Art Now* (Figure 4.4), held at the Saatchi Collection, London, in 1986. This exhibition featured artists associated with New York Neo-geo, such as Ashley Bickerton, Ross Bleckner, Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, Philip Taaffe, Meyer Vaisman, and, of course, Halley himself, alongside Tim Rollins & K.O.S. and Robert Gober—neither of whom were linked with Neo-geo in any substantial way.75 The most prominent accounts of the impact of this show on the YBA generation—most of whom were still studying at London art schools at the time, or were recent graduates—comes directly from the artists themselves. Damien Hirst, a figurehead for the YBA scene, has said the following about *NY Art Now*:

[Saatchi] was just there at the perfect point with a huge fucking space […] And then [he] did the New York show. I remember walking in and going, ‘Hey, my eyes!’ The whiteness of it! It just blew me away. And it was so not British. And that just totally inspired all the students. We wanted to show at the Saatchi Gallery immediately. And then

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75 In 1985 advertising mogul and ‘super-collector’ Charles Saatchi opened The Saatchi Collection in a 30,000 square foot disused paint factory on Boundary Road, in St John’s Wood, London. Early exhibitions included a four person show of works by American artists Donald Judd, Brice Marden, Cy Twombly, and Andy Warhol (March–October, 1985). Following this, another group show of established Americans featured works by John Chamberlain, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Robert Ryman, Frank Stella, and Carl Andre (December 1985–July 1986). The third exhibition at the Collection was *NY Art Now*, a two-part show running from September 1986 to January 1987. Halley featured in the first iteration of this show. The second iteration, which followed later in 1987, featured a looser grouping of New York artists, including Carroll Dunham, Ti-Shan Hsu, Jonathan Kessler, Jonathan Lasker, Allan McCollum, Peter Schuyff, and Starn Twins.
we started making work really to fit in there. And that’s when we realised we wouldn’t fit into the art world the way it was.
So I went and got a warehouse, and we did that show [Hirst is referring to Freeze, the exhibition that launched the careers of many of the YBAs].

We can consider an early work by Hirst like A Thousand Years (1991) (Figure 4.5) to exemplify the impact of NY Art Now. This sculptural installation features a room-sized vitrine inside of which is staged a macabre existential circuit between a putrefying cow’s head infested with maggots from which flies were constantly being born, and an electrical fly-trap that intermittently zaps and kills the flies. With its frame of heavy corten steel held together with large bolts to form a double box or chamber structure, A Thousand Years seems to quote the heavyweight industrial aesthetic forms of Donald Judd’s work. And yet, with the grim self-perpetuating horror of its contents, Hirst infects or contaminates Judd’s pure clean lines with a sclerotic, festering kind of life force—a fragile vitalism constantly in danger of tipping over into death itself. As critic Haden-Guest observed accordingly, A Thousand Years had the appearance of ‘a haunted Donald Judd’.

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76 ‘Hirst Interview with Anthony Haden-Guest’, quoted in Ulrich Blanché, Banksy: Urban Art in a Material World (Verlag Tectum: Marburg, 2016), 71. Freeze was a large group exhibition organised by Hirst, then in the second year of his undergraduate course at Goldsmiths College of Art, in a vacant warehouse building in the Canada Water area of London’s Docklands. Freeze is recognised as launching the careers of YBAs such as Gary Hume, Sarah Lucas, Angus Fairhurst, Fiona Rae, and Hirst himself. Most notably, as intended, it drew the attention of Charles Saatchi, who attended and who soon after began to buy the work of the YBAs. Indeed, Saatchi attempted to buy Hirst’s graduate exhibition at Goldsmiths the year after Freeze, but was turned down by the college, who were only willing to sell to a gallery. That same year, however, he bought two of Hirst’s medicine cabinet works from the New Contemporaries exhibition at The ICA, London and, in 1990, A Thousand Years (1991) (Figure 4), one of Hirst’s key early works.

Another YBA artist impacted by *NY Art Now* was the painter Gary Hume. As he recalled in 2015:

*When that Neo-geo show opened it was just unbelievable. It was the equivalent of the Armory Show in New York in 1918, or whenever it was. To see that show was like seeing real life Picassos and Cézannes when before you’d [only] seen prints of them […] To be brash, bold, ugly and ridiculous […] there was a sense in England of a sort of dowdy brownness; the explosion of light that that show gave me was just thrilling.\(^{78}\)*

In September 1986, when part one of *NY Art Now* opened at the Saatchi Collection, Hume was just starting his second year at Goldsmiths. By the following and final year of his studies, after ‘mainly making rubbish’ for two years, Hume had a breakthrough: a 1:1 scale painting on canvas of a hospital door. Describing this work as a ‘revelation’, Hume began a series of ‘door paintings’ that would continue for several years, bringing him international attention as a key member of the YBA cohort.

The earliest door paintings (Figures 4.6–4.7) are made on canvas and replicate the exact dimensions of swinging hospital doors installed in London hospital, St Bartholomew’s (the UK’s oldest hospital), in the mid-1980s.\(^{79}\) The basic features of these doors—their rectangular form, porthole or square windows, and square or rectangular kickplates and fingerplates—are combined in such a way that they appear

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like a reductive modernist composition: a rigid, austere, and planar formalist arrangement of circles, squares, and rectangles set against a field of pure colour. Though the later door paintings were composed from bright, often mismatched colour schemes, the early versions were monochromatic, and, like Halley’s paintings, involved in the social semiotics of colour. Indeed, Hume used particular colours—magnolia, pale pink, mint white—to signify the kind of ‘institutional’ colours used in a hospital like St Bartholomew’s, in doing so pointing to heated debates around the privatisation of Britain’s National Health Service being provoked at the time by Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal government at the time.\(^{80}\) The fact that Hume claims that the original door painting made in Goldsmiths was inspired by a ‘wretched’ advertising image by UK-based private healthcare provider BUPA would only seem to underscore this context. Indeed, as Adrian Searle wryly observes of these works, ‘if the government has its way, Hume’s paintings may soon be all that’s left of the oldest hospital in the land’.\(^{81}\)

There are numerous other examples of YBA artists, and those who came after them, using inherited forms of geometric abstraction in ‘socialised’ ways. These include Rachel Whiteread’s austere, minimalist sculptures are made by casting the negative

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\(^{81}\) Searle, ‘Shut That Door’. In his essay about the door paintings, Searle projects a rich image of the institutional backdrop of these works: ‘Trolleys trundle by: some carry the sick, others freight pre-cooked meals in heated wagons, yet more are stacked with library books, medical notes or pieces of equipment. Sometimes a sealed box passes by, with a corpse still warm from the bed. No one takes much notice. Then there are the wheelchairs, ferrying people to X-Ray, and the convoys of cleaning equipment, the bedpans and laundry, and the giggling, ranting, pre-medicated Nil-By-Mouth victims being wheeled down to theatre. The doors flap open and shut. They are reinforced with metal panels, protecting them from a careless, constant battering. There’s usually a big aluminium or steel plate screwed to the lower half of the panel to meet larger traffic, and a smaller handplate near the edge of the door, below the porthole. The doors swing to and fro, all day and all night long […] The double doors which punctuate hospital corridors are hinged so that they can be pushed open in either direction. They have circular windows set into each panel, so that users can see whether they are likely to collide with oncoming traffic. A collision here may not just be farcical, but fatal. There are doors such as these not only in hospitals, but in institutions of all kinds: schools, prisons, factories, canteens and offices.’ Searle’s words resonate with similar ideas expressed in Halley’s Foucault-inspired text ‘Notes on the Paintings’: ‘The cell is a reminder of the apartment house, the hospital bed, the school desk—the isolated endpoints of industrial structure’. Peter Halley, ‘Notes on the Paintings’, *Selected Essays*, 68.
space of the interiors of domestic buildings, and architectural parts such as doors, window frames, floors, staircases, bathtubs, bookcases, hot water bottles, chairs, tables and mattresses in resin, rubber, concrete, and plaster (Figure 4.8); Grenville Davey’s minimalist enlargements of everyday objects such as buttons and kitchen tables (Figure 4.9); Keith Coventry’s plotting of the aerial layout of British council estates using the geometric lexicon of movements such as Suprematism and de Stijl (Figure 4.10); Langlands and Bell’s lacquered monochrome meditations on architectural form and design (Figure 4.11); Mona Hatoum’s grid form installations and sculptures, which reference systems of power and control in society (Figure 4.12); and Liam Gillick’s bold, chromatically lively structures that meditate on language and the ideological systems that impact our daily lives (Figure 4.13). As this cursory look at British art of the 1990s demonstrates, the kind of procedure suggested by Halley’s postmodernist approach to abstraction was commonplace in galleries and museums, both during the 1990s and beyond. And while Peter Halley may not want to carry the can for the torrent of coded geometric forms that have steadily flowed through contemporary art galleries and museums since the 1990s, he may be more accepting of

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82 London was not the only European city where geometric art underwent social re-activation in the late 1980s and 1990s. Consider these words by Austrian artist Heinrich Dunst on the subject of the European iteration of what he describes as ’the Neo-geo movement’: ’In 1986, I participated alongside Heimo [Zobernig] and Gerwald [Rokonschaub] in the exhibition Tableaux Abstracts at Villa Arson in Nice where international colleagues including John Armleder and Blinky Palermo were also represented. It was there that I met Imi Knoebel, whom I still hold in great esteem today. This exhibition received international acclaim and became the prototype of the Neo-geo movement’. Tableaux Abstracts featured three paintings by Halley: Cell (1983), Yellow Prison with Underground Conduit (1985), and Red Cell with Orange Background (1985), alongside works by other artists associated with New York Neo-geo, such as Sherrie Levine, Peter Schuyff, and Phillip Taaffe. These Americans were joined by a generation of Europeans, including (as mentioned), Dunst, Zobernig, Rokonschaub, and Knoebel, as well as those from an older generation, such as Blinky Palermo and Sigmar Polke. As Dunst explains, ’the Neo-geo movement understood itself as an alternative to figurative-expressive painting. It manifested itself in the use of geometric, often coloured, basic forms, which are not limited to painting, but are also taken up in space-filling installations or filigree works on paper. An essential feature of these geometric forms is that they are coded, thus elevating the geometric elements to the status of a metaphorical medium of communication. This codification often leads to figurative associations’. ’In The Studio: Heinrich Dunst: Vienna’, Collectors Agenda https://www.collectorsagenda.com/in-the-studio/heinrich-dunst.
the idea that his work was instrumental in the resuscitation of abstract geometric art under new discursive terms. As it became increasingly clear in the 1990s, abstract geometric painting need not be solely understood in formalist terms. In this sense, Halley was a key figure in opening up minimalist geometric abstraction to a vast set of new possibilities—each, in its own way, an index of the social worlds we occupy.

Holding all of this in mind, we can say that Halley’s postmodernist paintings show us different ways to understand how abstract artistic forms are dialectically “involved” in socioeconomic structures and systems specific to the historical reality that produces them. In this sense, Halley advances a conception of artistic form that resonates with Fredric Jameson’s understanding of artistic form as the “final articulation” of historically specific types of social content. For Jameson, who has written extensively on the question of the economic mediation of artistic form—whether abstract or figurative; textual or visual—artistic form can never be autonomous from social reality, can never not be implicated in political structures and apparatuses. This is Jameson writing in 1981—the year of Halley’s earliest attempts to unify a reading of abstract painting and socio-economic developments in post-war America in his painting:

The convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than error […] Such a distinction reconfirms that structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic; between history or society and the “individual,” which – the tendential law of social life under capitalism – maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking
about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself [...] The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is “in the last analysis” political.\(^\text{83}\)

This dialectical mode of critical analysis is, for Jameson, an approach that constantly seeks conjunctions between artistic form and ‘social life as a whole’.\(^\text{84}\) The result is a totalising hermeneutic method grounded in the essential interrelatedness of phenomena. When approached dialectically, in terms of this kind of form/content relationship, artworks take on a kind of *gestalt* in which artistic form is set into a constant, oscillating relation with the socio-economic context and historical background from which the artwork emerges. The most pressing critical task for Jameson is, therefore, to locate artistic forms historically. If Jameson has a slogan, it is the following: ‘always historicize!’\(^\text{85}\) Holding this in mind, I want to now explore a number of different ways we can read the form of Halley’s works as *historicising* their social situation in 1980s New York City—in doing so, illuminating the social logic of capitalism at this time.

### 4.2 Illuminating Capitalism

Central to Halley’s historicising model of abstraction are his core motifs. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, these motifs are abstracted representations of specific social forms. On the one hand, I proposed that one way to

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understand Halley’s abstracted paintings of prisons and other architectural structures set within an exhausted, strangely illuminated landscape made in his first years back in New York, is as an attempt to depict the kind of social space that was generated in New York by the crisis and breakdown of industrial capitalism. On the other hand, I proposed that we might read the proliferating conduits, underground spaces, and Day-glo colour of Halley’s work from 1981 onwards as expressions of new social forms, such as electronic market networks and screen-based technologies, gearing the post-industrial transformation of New York. In both of these cases, whether engaging with the exhausted social forms of a late-industrial city, or the incipient social forms of a post-industrial, late-capitalist city, we can say that Halley demonstrates a sensitivity to the way that social forms such as types of architecture or technological systems are mediated by the specific mode of production that generates them.

In a sense, then, Halley treats social forms as effects generated by the social logic of historically specific economic systems or structures, systems and structures that cannot themselves be depicted or represented directly. It’s worth quoting Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser here regarding capitalist effects. As he writes:

> The structure which controls the concrete existence of men, i.e. which informs the lived ideology of the relations between men and objects and between objects and men, this structure, as a structure, can never be depicted by its presence, in person, positively, in relief, but only by traces and effects.\(^86\)

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As Althusser makes clear, what the everyday experience of capitalist reality amounts to is an encounter with capitalist effects that are expressions of a system or structure that otherwise defies human experience.

Halley’s method of abstraction can be understood as an attempt to somehow reverse engineer this situation. His paintings—in particular his core motifs—aspire to expose or reveal how capitalism works by treating a range of social forms as capitalist effects awaiting demystification. Through his knowing and careful quotation of tropes of past abstract art, Halley attempts to bring us closer to an aesthetic or visual experience of what cannot be properly aestheticised, cannot be made visible for human perception. My claim for these paintings is, therefore, that they have a kind of demystifying valence *qua* capitalism. That is, these paintings can be understood as representing social forms in such a way as to expose them as capitalist effects determined by the social logic of a given historical moment.

As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, Halley’s approach to representing modernist architectural forms revealed aspects of objectification and dehumanisation implicit in the highly mechanised logic of Fordist industrial production at work in the obsolete or recently antiquated architecture of post-war urban renewal. And as I explored in Chapter Three, Halley’s treatment of computer technologies exposed different ways in which the technological conditions of a new economic moment emerging in the 1980s afforded capital ways of, on the one hand, escaping or evading our vision, and on the other, disrupting or mesmerising our attention. In the face of both of these contexts, Halley’s paintings would appear to offer a particular, certainly complex, but nonetheless useful kind of orientation to their viewers.
Holding this in mind, I want to highlight a particular paradox that I think is instructive with regard to this issue of orientation. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the 1980s were a time of particular social disorientation in New York City. However, we can also understand these years of crisis and social transformation as providing a kind of historical vantage point from which to survey or map social reality. This is an opportunity Halley, for one, readily exploited in his paintings. Writing in the 1920s, Marxist literary critic Georg Lukács discussed the possibility that periods of economic crisis and turmoil offer an opportunity for the practical comprehension of the otherwise mystified social logic capitalism:

In the age of capitalism it is not possible for the total system to become directly visible in external phenomenon. For instance, the economic basis of a world crisis is undoubtedly unified and its coherence can be understood. But its actual appearance in time and space will take the form of a disparate succession of events [...] But the further the economic crisis of capitalism advances the more clearly this unity in the economic process becomes comprehensible in practice. It was there, of course, in so-called periods of normality, too [...] but the gap between appearance and ultimate reality was too great for that unity to have any practical consequences [...] In periods of crisis the position is quite different. The unity of the economic process now moves within reach.87

For Lukács, during period of crisis mechanisms structuring social reality are exposed, become more obviously visible, and, therefore available for comprehension (and, further, aesthetic representation).

This same idea animates aspects of Bertolt Brecht’s understanding of the way history reveals itself in crisis:

We gain our knowledge of life in a catastrophic form. It is from catastrophes that we have to infer the manner in which our social formation functions. Through reflection, we must deduce the ‘inside story’ of crises, depressions, revolutions, and wars. We already sense from reading the newspapers (but also bills, letters of dismissal, call-up papers and so forth) that somebody must have done something for the evident catastrophe to have taken place. So what then has been done and by whom? Behind the reported events, we suspect other occurrences about which we are not told. These are the real occurrences. If we knew these incidents, we would understand. Only History can inform us about these real occurrences—insofar as the protagonists have not succeeded in keeping them completely secret. History is written after catastrophes.88

As both Lukács and Brecht propose, while capitalism is a more or less invisible force at work in external phenomena and effects within urban space, aspects of its otherwise

obscure internal mechanisms of capitalism become more readily available for perception during periods of social upheaval and disruption.

And yet, as emphasised by Brecht in his account of the naivety of realist of documentary photography explored in my introduction, and at different points elsewhere in this thesis, while crisis might bring cryptic economic processes closer to our reach, representing that which is masked or concealed by the abstract logic of capitalism in aesthetic or artistic forms remains a complex task that cannot be approached too literally. Enter, then, forms of aesthetic abstraction that bypass realist approaches to depicting social reality in favour of other representational means. As art historian Jaleh Mansoor speculates in this regard, ‘to what extent is “aesthetic” abstraction the most concrete, which is to say “realistic” way of articulating abstract social relations?’

Mansoor’s recent work provides an important framework for exploring this kind of question by engaging ways in which aesthetic or artistic abstraction can facilitate understandings of capitalism’s real abstraction in ways that realist forms of art, or other forms of socially engaged practice, cannot. Drawing from Jameson’s claim that “we can think abstractly about the world only to the extent that the world itself has already become abstract,” Mansoor understands abstract artworks as ‘[etiologies] through which to make some kind of prognosis about the state of capital at a particular historical and geopolitical conjuncture’. While Mansoor’s recent research concerns the relationship

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between the postwar abstract art of Italian artists such as Lucio Fontana and Alberto Burri, and the mode of production of a different geopolitical conjuncture, her framing of abstraction is useful for understanding Halley’s project, as I have interpreted it in this thesis.\textsuperscript{91}

Something I think is worth underlining here is Halley’s particular approach to articulating, or “building up”, an image of abstract social relations at work beneath the appearances of capitalist reality. We can understand Halley’s painting as advancing something like a visual pedagogy, a refunctioning of the eye of the viewer, aimed at equipping us with a kind of abstraction dissolving vision that sees, in the most banal of everyday urban effects, the traces of an economic system that otherwise refuses depiction or representation. And while, in one sense, Halley’s work amounts to a sustained and rigorous repudiation of the Greenbergian theoretical conventions of formalist art, in another sense, his paintings take advantage of different aspects of the aesthetic power of past formalist art.

Writing a few years after the period that concerns this thesis, Roberta Smith took stock of this aspect of Halley’s work. One of Halley’s most attentive critics, Smith compared Halley to Ellsworth Kelly, arguing that both artists are engaged in a process she describes as ‘learning to see by Minimalism’s slow fire’.\textsuperscript{92} While Smith qualified this statement by saying ‘strictly speaking, neither Halley nor Kelly is a Minimalist’, she argued that ‘both bracket the movement, stylistically and chronologically, in illuminating


ways, and both tie its abstract purity to the real world'. Noting that Kelly is ‘a kind of proto-Minimalist who arrived at his quiet distillations of color and edge in the early 1950s over a decade before the term was even coined’, Smith adds that ‘he has always taken inspiration from “abstractions” in everyday life, especially the unexpected abbreviations caused by shadows on buildings’. It is this procedure in Kelly’s work, the distillation of ‘everyday abstractions’ into ‘aesthetic abstractions’, or the rendering quotidian or urban of formalist art, to which Smith compares Halley. For Smith, Halley’s work

‘points to further possibilities of Minimalist development, and these relate very much to his non-Minimalist insistence that his plain cubes and bands, which come in eye-searing fluorescent colours, are not strictly self-referential. With titles that identify them as battery or prison cells, conduits, nuclear reactors, and the like, Halley’s motifs try to implicate systems of power far beyond the artistic realm’. 

Smith’s point regarding Minimalism, a point that I think can be extended to cover a wider range of minimalist-type art forms, is that this sort of work cultivates a certain eye or way of looking at the world, both in its maker, and viewer. While Halley does not depart from the ‘narrow artistic vocabularies’ he has established for himself, like Kelly’s work Halley’s pictures afford ‘a valuable immersion’ in ‘the deeper understanding of reality

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93 Smith, ‘Art View’, Section 2, 41.
94 Smith, ‘Art View’. 
that looking can set in motion’. If, as Smith proposes, Halley’s 1980s paintings ‘push the Minimalist notion of pure unadulterated visual power to a new height’, then I would argue that this is an example of aesthetic power being harnessed in order to describe or expose the logic of different kinds of capitalist power.

While Smith only hints at this link between aesthetic and political-economic power in her appraisal of Halley’s paintings of the 1980s (‘systems of power far beyond the artistic realm’), in attaching the minimalist credo of ‘complete faith in the eye’s ability to see, and in seeing, to provoke critical thought’ to Halley’s work, her reading emphasises that, with Halley’s art, we encounter a complex, historically significant admixture of theory and aesthetics—a visually grounded “social abstraction” that operates in ways that theory alone cannot.

While I have argued that Halley’s paintings transmit or translate—non-conceptually, perhaps even subliminally—complex theoretical conceptions of the historical situation unfolding in New York in the 1980s, it’s important to emphasise that ultimate model of this transmission—abstract painting—is purposely inexact, idiosyncratic, subjective, which is to say aesthetic: the result of one individual’s experience of the world. As art historian Eve Meltzer has stated regarding the complex relationship the developed between structuralist theory and Conceptual Art during the 1970s, aesthetic procedures reveal in their ‘affective and visual dimensions the slips and chiasms of subjectivity’ that strict theoretical procedures cannot. My claim is that it is precisely these affectively charged slippages and overlaps in art works that help us

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95 Smith, ‘Art View’.
96 E. Meltzer, Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2013), 11.
have experiences of capitalism that can never be contained in purely textual or social theoretical terms. As Jameson has argued:

You can teach people how this or that view of the world is to be thought or conceptualized, but the real problem is that it is increasingly hard for people to put that together with their own experiences as individual psychological subjects, in daily life [...] Aesthetics is something that addresses individual experience rather than something that conceptualizes the real in a more abstract way.\(^{97}\)

In line with Jameson’s conception of aesthetics here, I hold that the value of Halley’s work is therefore two fold. On the one hand, looking at these paintings gives us a way of viewing otherwise opaque or abstract socio-economic conditions from awry, in doing so allowing us to understand what may not be otherwise given or visible in reality. But, perhaps more importantly, learning to see \textit{with} Halley promotes a particular kind of vision, a kind of critical perception that is fundamentally hostile to exactly the kind of sensual numbness late-capitalism otherwise encourages in us.

\textbf{4.3 Abstraction Restated}

In 1992 Dan Cameron made a bold statement concerning the historical significance of Halley’s work. Writing in the catalogue to Halley’s 1992 exhibition at Des

Moines Art Centre on the subject of the often questioned seriousness and value of Halley’s painting, Cameron wrote that he considered Halley to be ‘one of only a small handful of painters of his generation who have managed to effectively restate the terms of abstraction in our own time’. In line with Cameron’s appraisal, in this thesis I have argued that what Halley’s work offers is the possibility of a new kind of model for abstract art; a kind of postmodernist social abstraction. Considering Halley’s paintings of the 1980s offers an opportunity to analyse and understand a subversive postmodernist style. Halley’s quotational method, his use of pastiche in particular, is subversive inasmuch as it exploits core postmodernist tendencies to bring to the surface of his paintings a sense both of history and of the challenges that must be confronted in representing history.

In this way, Halley’s art would seem to push through and beyond commonplace criticisms regarding pastiche in postmodern painting. While I have shown that Jameson was the basis of these original critiques, I would like to end with an opposing view offered by Jameson himself regarding the critical potential of pastiche. In an interview first published in abbreviated form in the December 1986 / January 1987 edition of *Flash Art* magazine, Jameson identified what he called a ‘homeopathic’ tendency in certain modernist and postmodernist artworks. Speaking first of a homeopathic tendency at work in modernism—the way that modernism seized reification and transformed it into an active process designed to counter the passive reifications upon which the social experience of modernity is built—Jameson speculated that modernism could be characterised ‘as an experience of nascent commodification which fought

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reification by means of reification, in terms of reification’, that is, ‘as a gigantic process of reification internalized as a homeopathic way of seizing on this force, mastering it and opposing the result to reifications passively submitted to an external reality’. As Jameson continued, ‘I am wondering whether some positive features of postmodernism couldn’t do that as well: an attempt somehow to master these things by choosing them and pushing them to their limits. There is a whole range of so-called oppositional arts, whether it’s punk writing, or ethnic writing, which really try to use postmodern techniques […] to go through and beyond.’ In the same interview, Jameson described this type of strategy in terms of the concept of pastiche, arguing that it might be possible to

undo postmodernism homoeopathically by the methods of postmodernism: to work at dissolving the pastiche by using all the instruments of pastiche itself, to reconquer some genuine historical sense by using the instruments of what I have called the substitutes for history […] The figure of homeopathic medicine here does not imply that this is the only way culture functions, but it is often the case.100

As I hope I have demonstrated in this thesis, in Halley’s hands, a model of art in terminal decline by the early 1980s—geometric abstraction—was revived and restated in a procedure that was at once the expression of a new set of (possibly morbid) historical symptoms linked to the new economic conditions of late capitalism, as well as,

100 Stephanson, ‘Regarding Postmodernism’, 59.
crucially, a form of resistance against these deleterious symptoms, and the sense of historical amnesia that they seemed, for Jameson at least, to generate in postmodernist cultural production. While other writers have dedicated much time to describing the way in which Halley’s paintings of the 1980s were a symptom of prevailing historical conditions, this thesis has attempted to argue that, as a kernel or nugget concealed within their apparent a-historicity, Halley’s art actually offers a rich and multifaceted representation of capitalist reality, in doing so reconstituting the relationship between history and abstraction for a new historical moment. And so, despite challenging traditional concepts of critique, it is plausible to argue that Halley’s paintings did indeed reconquer ‘some genuine historical sense’, as Jameson describes it, of their own historical situation in the 1980s.

What Halley shows us is that abstract painting need not be self-referential and purely formalist. Equally, Halley’s painting shows us is that making political art need not be limited to the sort of direct political expressions made by a group like Group Material, those overtly or explicitly ‘resistant’ tendencies foregrounded in their 1987 exhibition at White Columns. Halley’s work is a project of critical understanding or mapping, but not, per se, political agency or action. As Toscano and Kinkle have argued regarding the deferred political import of the aesthetics of cognitive mapping we can associate Halley’s work with:

Works emerging under the banner of this aesthetic would enable individuals and collectivities to render their place in a capitalist world-system intelligible […] While such artworks and narratives
would not be merely didactic or pedagogical, they would of necessity also be didactic or pedagogical, recasting what political teaching, instruction or even propaganda might mean in our historical moment. What is at stake is the figurability or representability of our present and its shaping effect on political action. In a strong interpretation, the mapping of capitalism is a precondition for identifying any ‘levers’, nerve-centres or weak links in the political anatomy of contemporary domination.101

While Halley’s paintings of the 1980s offer no mandate for political action, these works do ‘resist’ capitalism by mapping its historical logic. And, as I have argued, in times of unparalleled disorientation, such as the early 1980s in New York—times, in other words, where it is hard, if not impossible, to get a proper footing upon an ever-changing social landscape—it is perhaps not action (which, to be effective must surely be in some way “surefooted”) that is best, but rather understanding itself: the steady, sustained, interested, and embodied “mapping” or “diagramming” of the problems we face, that takes on critical importance. It is reasonable to claim, therefore, that these paintings cultivated critical thought and understanding of the abstractive tendencies of late-capitalist life in 1980s New York, and, in doing so, suggest a new social role for geometric abstraction.

101 Toscano and Kinkle, Cartographies of the Absolute, 21–22.


Figure 4.8. Rachel Whiteread (1993). *House.*
Figure 4.9. Grenville Davey (1989). *By Air*. Hardboard, wood and steel, 185 x 325 x 185cm. Collection: Tate Britain. [https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/davey-by-air-t07183](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/davey-by-air-t07183)

Figure 4.10. Keith Coventry (1995). *Heygate Estate*. Oil paint on canvas, wood and glass, 97 x 71 x 54cm. Collection: Tate Britain. [https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/coventry-heygate-estate-t12300](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/coventry-heygate-estate-t12300)

Figure 4.13. Liam Gillick (2001). *Annlee You Proposes*. Aluminium, 3 lamps and video, 3 monitors, colour and sound. Dimensions variable. Collection: Tate Britain. 
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