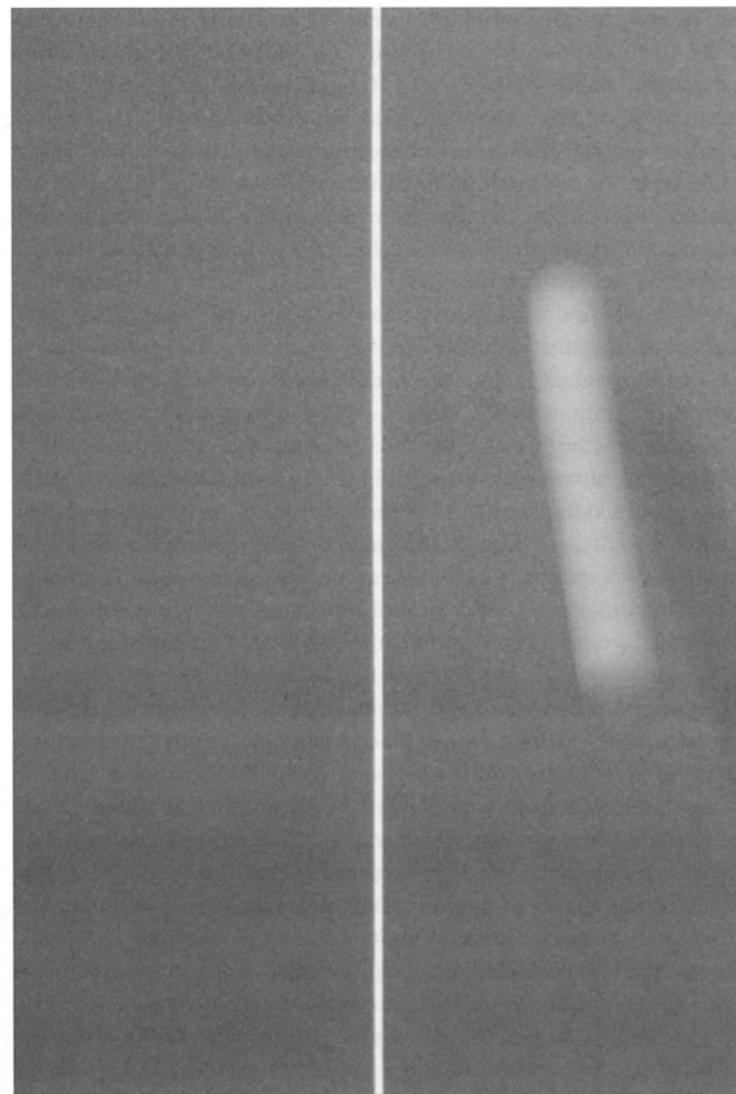


solely to road painting. In this worldly genre, an “end” is a limit or perhaps a functional goal. In the history of abstract painting especially, “end” connotes a terminus, a point of either futility or transcendence that has been envisioned in monochrome painting since Malevich’s Suprematism and Rodchenko’s materialism. These speculations on the end of painting took place within a decade of 1911 and have been renewed several times since. Thinking of how Wells’ paintings, photographs, and performances link the everyday world and that of painting’s habits and traditions, however, we might well ask what his work can say about painting’s ends, its role and purpose within the social. To this purpose, let me imagine a rotographic text piece that takes off from *PLEINAIRISME*, one that – following Wells’ punning practices – I will call Plain/Heir/Ism.

In his two-part work with this name and in the exhibition generally, Wells plays with the tradition of painting outdoors, en plein air, in front of the motif, that we think of as quintessentially French. But as we have seen, he constantly schematizes, moves, and thus examines the ultimate outdoor painting, that done with line marker paint, by bringing it indoors and into “art.” Substituting “plain” for “plein” suggests the connection to the semiotically saturated social world we live in, with its often invisible rules, boundaries, and materials. Plain is unpretentious but not unsophisticated: a new latex yellow superseding a slower drying oil. The line we see in *PLEINAIRISME*, framed by foliage and then by canvas, is plain in these ways. It works. “Heir” is of course what painting today is as a genre, the inheritor of high-art traditions. One does not need to paint consciously in the wake of these habits and reference points to have them figure in contexts of reception. To produce the abstract work in 1911 is to work in a line of production that includes the monochrome, field painting, formalism, conceptualism, and even the diagrammatic realities of Peter Halley’s conduits, which I discuss below. In the same way, contemporary painting cannot but be the heir of many “isms,” from the sweeping ones such as modernism and postmodernism, to those with more local inflections and varying suffixes. Especially when one paints in a way that looks abstract, “heir” and “ism” pull toward a separate world of aesthetic priorities and concerns. But in Wells’ practice, “plain” keeps the social in our minds. Or perhaps he reminds us that the social has, more often than not, been in view in abstraction. Mondrian designed Neo-Plasticism to function as a template for ideal relations in society. Think of the spectacular career of Newman’s *Voice of Fire* (1967), which was a touchstone of American cold-war liberty in the American Pavilion at Expo ‘67 in Montréal and then the butt of public outcries when purchased by the National Gallery of Canada in 1989.¹⁵ Contexts and meanings change, as we see in the movement from the road to the gallery and back in Wells’ work generally. Walking or driving down the street, we may well reconceive the evanescent social life of abstraction.

Abstractions by C. Wells and Ellsworth Kelly that look alike may not be at all alike when their visual appearance is contextualized. This point applies equally to



44. An Te Liu, still from *Prepared Ground*, 2003. Colour film transferred to DV, 13:30 loop. Photo courtesy of the artist.

the work of An Te Liu. The enticing title of his 2004 show at Artists Space in NYC – “Tackiness and Anti-Power” – might, in a Greenberg moment, seem to allude to kitsch or its defeat at the hands of purified abstraction. But no. His elaborate piece *Prepared Ground*, (2 images), a sixteen-millimeter colour film transferred to digital video, has, when we admire a still, an immediate reference to Newman’s signature zip paintings, some of which were green (Fig. 44). But what is that blur

on the right, and why are the surface and line so perfect? We can learn, but likely not exactly see, that the context is sport, specifically table tennis. "Tackiness" and "Anti-Power" are the names of energy-absorbing cushions – we might think of mats – used on ping pong bats. Liu recontextualizes other "abstract" sign systems found but again not much attended to in the world of recreation, such as marker lines on gymnasium floors. What he calls "game-space" is at once in dialogue with some of the abstract traditions we have been examining and also architectural. Liu's preoccupation with "surface" is evident, but it is a surface – whether of a floor or a paddle – that allows one to move socially. He claims to "unite the autonomous and the pure with the contingent, the real, and the possible" (Liu, 2003).

The purpose and production of a remarkable number of today's best known artists can be examined anew in the contexts of positive, social infection. Abstraction enters and contaminates social spaces, setting off reactions that test and reveal the resistance of both art and sociocultural systems. A short, representative, but by no means complete list would include Lydia Dona, Peter Halley, Fabian Marcaccio, David Reed, and Andres Serrano. Each one uses coordinates of abstraction discussed here to permeate the membranes between art and its social matrix. On a visual if not historical and theoretical plane, it would be productive to consider Jonathan Lasker's signature abstract units as infecting other such bodies. Are these diagrams intrusions into, interruptions of, conventional social relations? Connections of this sort could be multiplied with many other artists, but as usual in this book, I instead look in somewhat more detail at a much more confined set of instances. Serrano's early photographs of liquids are staged to look like neutral abstract art. But of course the potent associations of blood, milk, or urine spill over into social controversy.¹⁶ *Milk, Blood* of 1986 was Serrano's first apparently abstract photograph, though it was followed soon by *Circle of Blood* (1987) and others. Without language and its potent associations (Serrano's additional element, perhaps), these works might retain the aloofness of autonomy, a "proper" distance from society's anxieties about sexuality, motherhood, and other mores. Instead, as bell hooks has noted, "it is precisely Serrano's strategic merging of traditional aesthetic concerns with the social and political that gives his work its particular edge . . . [His photographs] critically interrogate the structure of patriarchal Christianity" (hooks, 1995, n.p.) and, I would add, patriarchal modernism in the form of the monochrome and colour field abstraction. Serrano claims that *Milk, Blood* is "a reference to Mondrian," by which he likely refers to the restricted colour range. "The work is about abstraction," he goes on to say, I "was amazed and pleased that the fluids had a life of their own and I had no control over the final image. Monochromes are a dime a dozen in painting, but you don't often see them in photography" (1993, 120). Blood's new association with AIDS displaces here its sacramental meanings. It portends death via infection, not life. Serrano is also frank about the racial implications of being of "mixed" blood, as he is, a state, more cultural than biological, that Morrison has investigated brilliantly