

## ***Abstraction, Ecstasy, Technology: Amy Ellingson's Paintings***

by Donald Kuspit

*...ecstatic phenomena proliferate in proportion to the technicization of society.*

Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*<sup>1</sup>

Amy Ellingson's abstract paintings can be understood as a kind of Op Art—they would fit comfortably in *The Responsive Eye* exhibition that introduced the movement to the art world in 1965 (via MoMA)—but there's much more to them than optical purity and illusionistic irony. They too explore the psychosomatic effects of color, light, motion, and shape. But Ellingson's paintings are much more than Op Art eye-teasers: they carry Cézanne's "vibrating sensations" to an electronic extreme, giving them an ecstatic edge beyond anything Cézanne expected. Ellingson's abstractions are optical orgasms—alive with an orgasmic vividness impossible until the computer came along. They hover between the sensuous and the sensual. They engage the eye, but they have a voluptuous presence, as though their intricate curves, inlaid in a grid—reminiscent of pattern painting—were the feverish trace of a body, ostensibly anonymous but implicitly female.

Am I free associating too far? Am I suggesting that Ellingson's paintings are paeans to female passion? Am I absurd in associating the *Identical/Variation (red)* series, 2006 with the multiple orgasms the female body is capable of in contrast to the one-at-a-time orgasm the male body is limited to, suggesting that men are much less erotically complex than women, much less able to enjoy their bodies, much less able to rise to the ecstatic heights than women? Perhaps, but there is no escaping the passionate complexity—the erotically convulsive character—of the *Identical/Variation (red)* series. The encaustic and oil with which they are painted gives them sensual richness. In the *Identical/Variation (lavender, green, brown, red)* paintings, red continues to dominate, with the other colors forming a secondary pattern that supports and elevates it, so that it seems to project beyond the painting, the relief-like illusion making it all the more startling—erotically forceful and overwhelming, indeed, ecstatically intense and confrontational. Hooked on Ellingson's colors, we are caught in her erotic net, woven of looping gestures that seem to wrap themselves around us, like passionate snakes.

But I am losing myself in speculative fantasy and getting ahead of my analysis. Ellingson may be an Op artist, making paintings that demonstrate what Vasarely called pulsing "kinetic plastics," but her abstractions encapsulate much of the history of abstraction, from Mondrian's late grid paintings through all-over "polyphonic" painting, as Clement Greenberg called it, to the generic field and feminist pattern painting that followed it (as well as "extensions" and transformations of Vasarely's and Bridget Riley's visual ideas). But

Ellingson's grid paintings are more exciting and rhythmically sophisticated than Mondrian's, her all-overness is more musically complex and technically sophisticated than modernist all-over painting (which began with Kandinsky), and her patterned fields more cognitively sophisticated, not to say intellectually demanding, and, at the same time, more emotionally insinuating and hedonistically intimidating, than anything produced by the feminist pattern painters. (And much more dramatically alive—vibrant with power—than Vasarely's and Riley's paintings.)

It is computer technology that has made this possible. It allows Ellingson to revitalize what has become stale, decadent, historical. Kandinsky spoke of the electric aliveness of his abstractions, but Ellingson's electronic abstractions are more alive than his paintings seem today. Ellingson writes: "The compositions are designed on the computer using simple geometrical shapes—lines, curves, arcs, and grids. I replicate and layer these primary elements into an increasingly complex field that I then render in discreet layers of oil and encaustic." Thus Ellingson thinks of herself as a computer formalist; as she states, her works are about "formal repetition, variation and mutation within limited serial systems and networks." But her painterly handling (more or less) of "computer-generated images, ghostlike diagrams of mathematical relationships, maps of evanescent data streams"—her Statement is as meticulously crafted, indeed, elegant and self-assured as her paintings—not only gives them "undeniable materiality and permanence," but an ingrained tactility, and with that a concentrated expressivity. Encaustic and oil also keep her work from seeming all too formulaic, however manipulated the geometrical formula. It is by combining the old technology of the brush with the new technology of the computer that Ellingson reaches new heights of abstract ecstasy—a new optical transcendence.

Her *Variation/Mutation (brown, blue, red, white)* mural, 2006—a triumphant tour de force of geometrical manipulation—is more abstractly intense and complicated than the *Identical/Variation* paintings. Both are expressively quirky and conceptually sophisticated, but the pattern is skewed—disintegrated into fragments—in the *Variation/Mutation (brown, blue, red, white)* mural. It may seem strange to say so, but the *Identical/Variation (red, green, black)* paintings, 2005 herald this disintegration—the emergence of entropy (implicit in the homogeneity of the grid, as Rudolf Arnheim argues), the absolute death conveyed by the ghostly whiteness of the *Variation/Mutation (brown, blue, red, white)* mural—and by the black grid of the *Identical/Variation (red, green, black)* paintings. The red has receded into the background, the black is disturbingly prominent. It is a branding iron that imprints itself on the eye, almost making it colorblind.

White also makes a strong appearance in the eccentric grids of the *Identical/Variation (lavender, green, red)* works, and a spectacular appearance in *Variation/Mutation (red, green, lavender, white)* but the grid holds together, however extravagantly complicated in the latter—it continues to have the emblematic look of an icon—making for an altogether different effect: light holding its own against the underlying grid, with its

dimness and vestiges of black. In contrast, the shattered/scattered effect in *Variation/Mutation* (*brown, blue, red, white*) indicates that death has invaded the grid, ironically undermining it to fresh expressive effect. The heterogeneity of the fragments mocks the grid's relentless if "twisted" uniformity in the *Identical/Variation* works. It is as though the grid has finally been distorted to the breaking point—twisted until it loses its geometrical identity and breaks apart.

But all is not lost: the fragments still vibrate with energy, like the twitching limbs of a body anatomically dissected while it is still alive. It is as though all the pent up energy in the grid—the energy that often distorted its appearance, bent its verticals and horizontals to the flexible limit—has been released, an explosive release that is a more obvious demonstration of entropy than the homogeneous grid, as Arnheim notes. In *Variation/Mutation* (*brown, blue, red, white*) the modules of the grid float in space and seem self-propelling. Like the grid, the module itself falls apart, becoming bits and pieces of geometrical debris. A more or less blurred grid—neat criss-crossing stripes of color, almost overwhelmed by ghostly loops (both have the look of dangling nerves)—looms behind the luminous geometrical chaos.

The effect is indeed fantastic—even more fantastic than the *Identical/Variation* paintings. *Variation/Mutation* (*brown, blue, red, white*) reminds me of Dubuffet's *L'Hourloupe* works, with their so-called "sinuous graphisms." In those works there is also a sense of perpetual motion and constant mutation and of playful fantasy. There is a graffiti-like spontaneity to Ellingson's fragments, just as there is to Dubuffet's face-figure fragments. In both cases the fragments fit together like a picture puzzle, although Ellingson's puzzle seems incomplete—parts are missing, perhaps permanently lost, or dissolved in the flux of the background, as its whiteness suggests. And in both cases there is a sense of organic metamorphosis, however inorganic the fragments look, whether they be geometrical or figurative fragments.

Ellingson's paintings are doubly abstract: they are cunning geometrical abstractions, and they make cunning use of the abstract programs inseparable from computer technology. They are applied computer abstractions and abstract optical constructions. And they make clear the connection of abstraction and ecstatic transcendence, evident in both geometrical and gestural abstraction from their beginning in the early twentieth century. Ellul writes that "technique has transformed man's quest for the spiritual," all the more so "in the societies that have as their avowed aim the maximal exploitation of technique."<sup>2</sup> In such societies—in our society—spirituality is expressed in and through technology. Technology is not only a means to the spiritual/transcendental end—an ecstatic high, such as we experience in Ellingson's optical paintings—but a spiritual/transcendental end. Ellingson's computer is inherently spiritual rather than simply a design instrument, just as the drawings and photographs it replaces have their own spiritual character, that is, ecstatic possibilities and erotic sensuousness.

The computer makes possible a new visual ecstasy. This ecstasy is implicit in its electronic

processing—its seemingly instantaneous and even spontaneous electronic conversion of visual and verbal information into pulsing energy. (Information has been described as materialized energy waiting to be released by the mind.) The mindful energy of Ellingson’s paintings—their conceptual and expressive character—is self-evident. And so is their strong sense appeal. They show that sensing can still be ecstatic, a mode of transcendence—sensing is innately ecstatic, ecstatic energy awaiting its release by art—in a highly technological society. All the more so when sophisticated technique is used to unite, seamlessly, the sense of sight and of touch—the former dramatically evident, the latter subliminally subtle, and both always ready to be refreshed by artistic experience—as in Ellingson’s masterpieces.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 420

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 421