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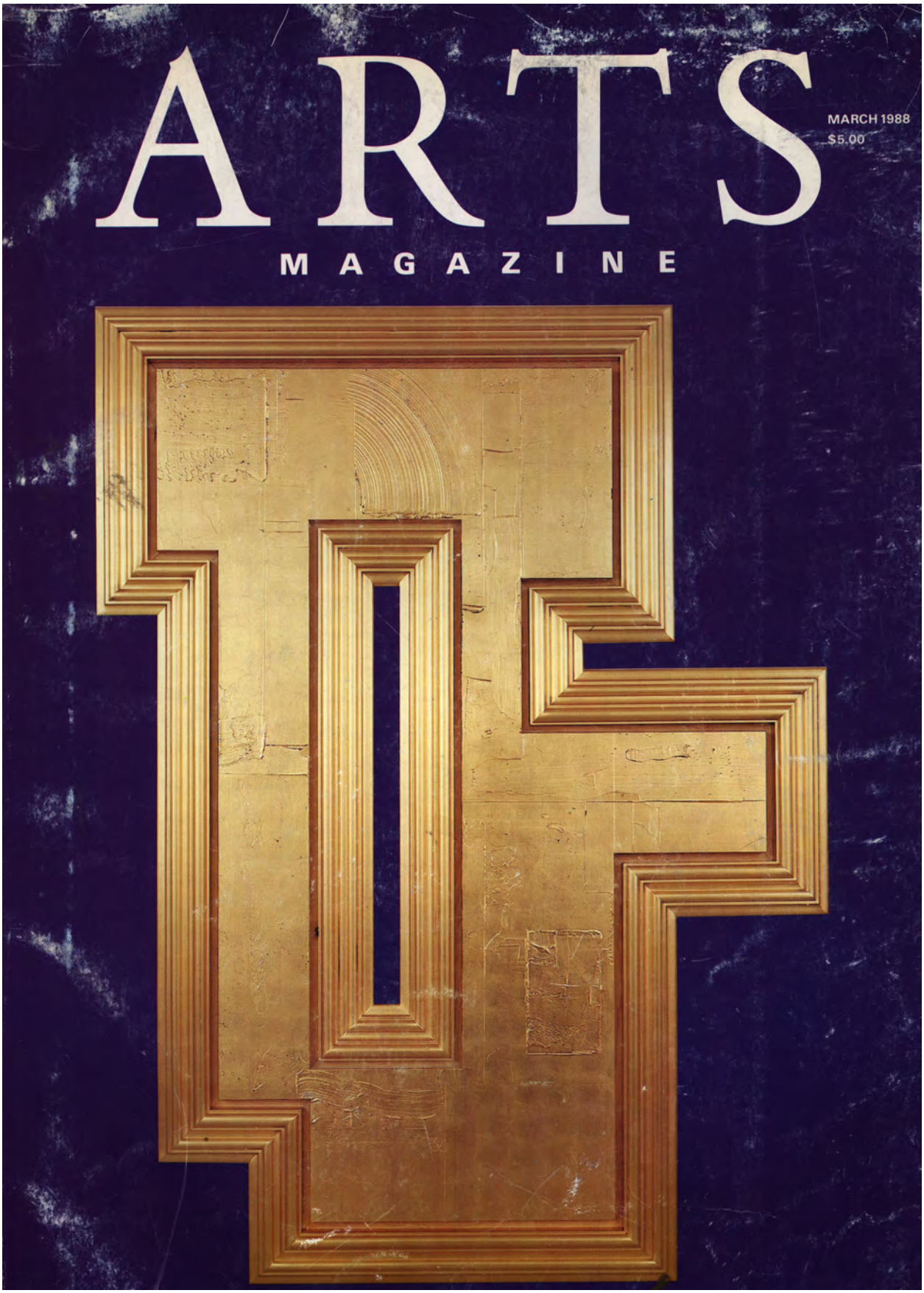

CHRISTIAN ECKART AND THE PROBLEMS OF COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTION IN MODERN PAINTING

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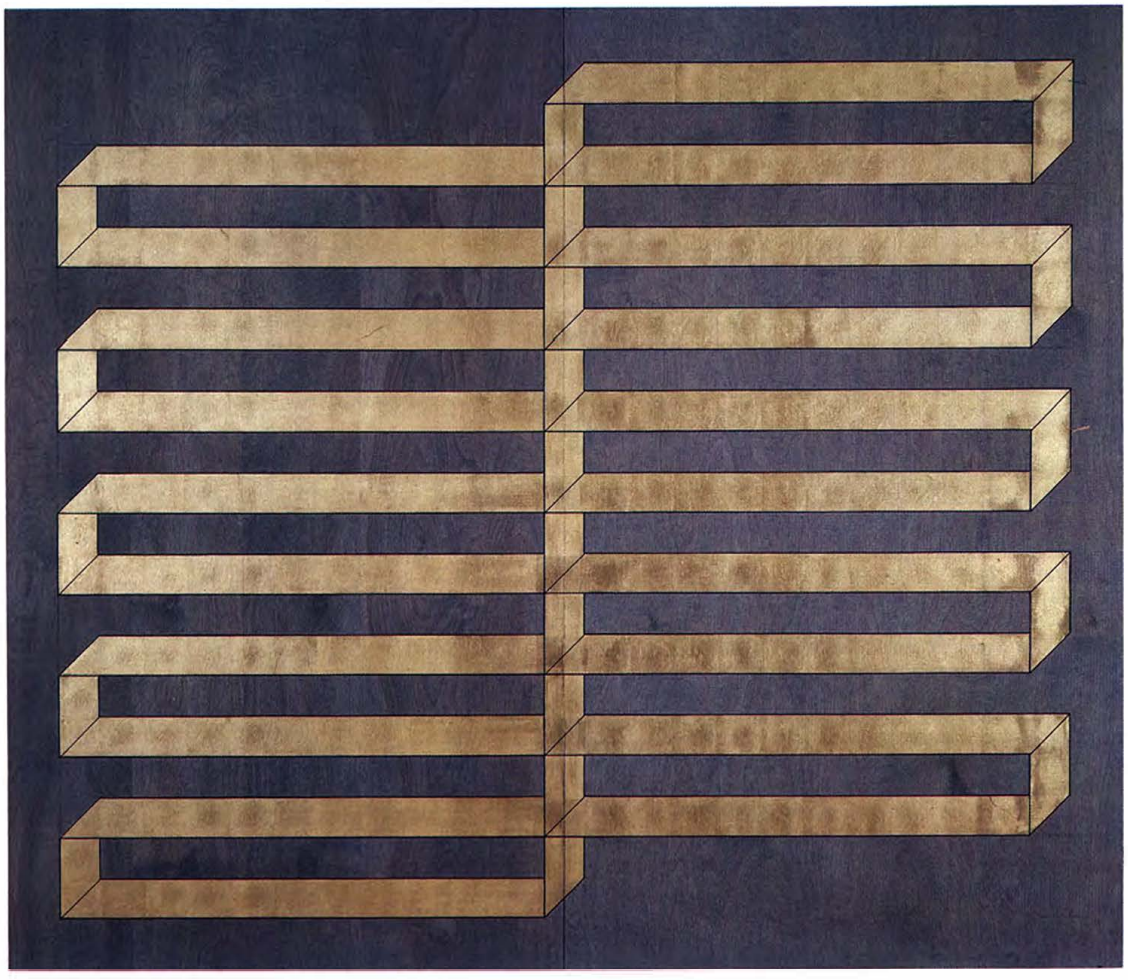
Daring one to create something out of nothing, Christian Eckart's paintings are the succinct rhetoric of contemporary painting.

The forms in art are always preformed and premeditated (premediated). The creative process is always an academic routine and sacred procedure. Everything is prescribed and proscribed. Only in this way is there no grasping or clinging to anything. Only a standard form can be imageless, only a stereotyped image can be formless, only a formulaized art can be formulaless . . . Fine art can only be defined as exclusive, negative, absolute and timeless.

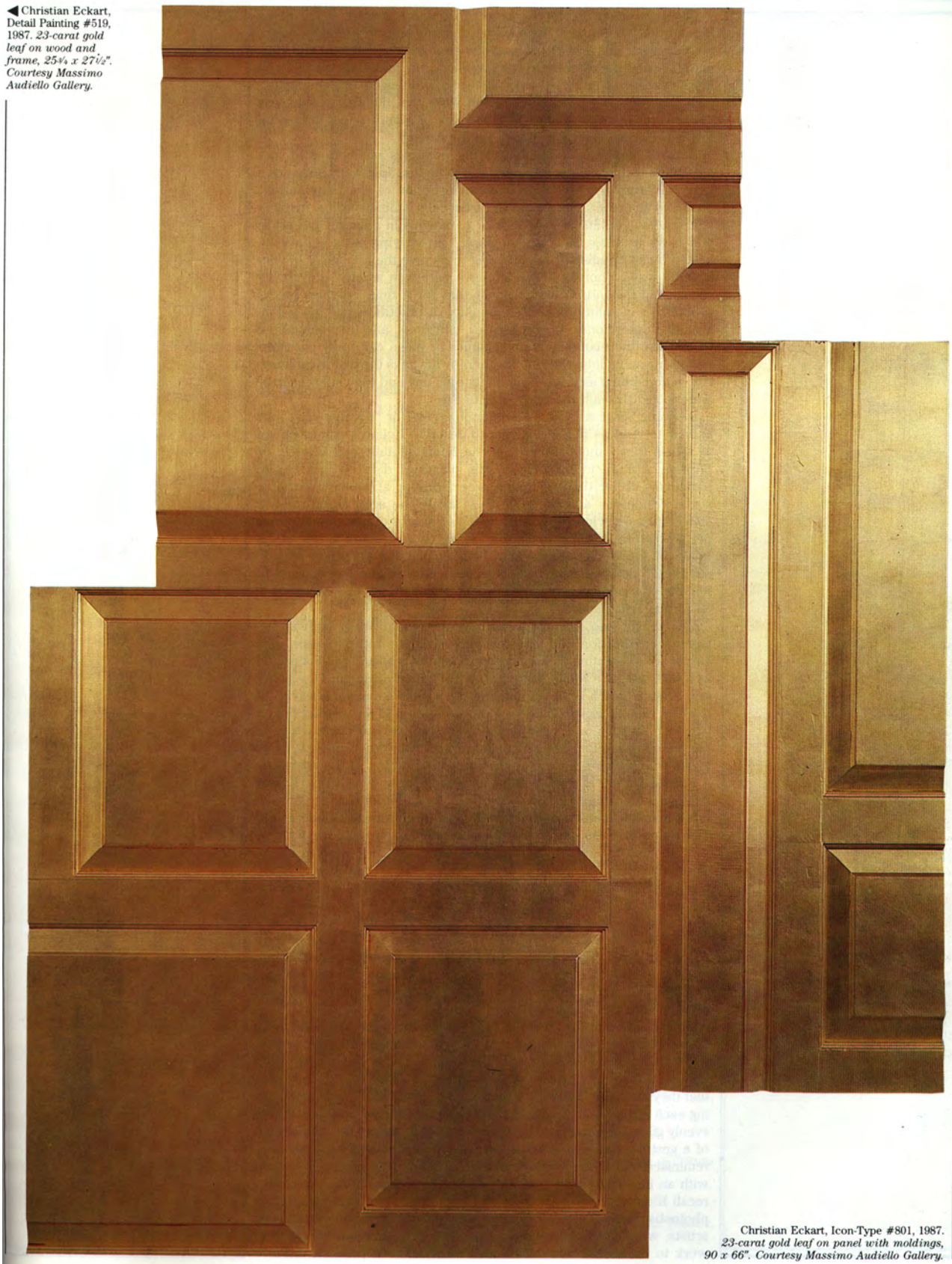
— Ad Reinhardt[1]

Despite his lofty idealism, Reinhardt really only asks us to improve our perception and evaluation of familiar theorems. Form in art, for Reinhardt, may be something that preexists, bound to structures which appear throughout the history of art and, as such, may be considered within the rubric of archetypes. The pursuit of any new form without appropriate review of these preexisting models is futile: Reinhardt's version of a stereotype may be precisely the novel form which seems bound to its moment, therefore divorced from its historical condition. Reinhardt's immaculate scriptorium seems at once researched and intuitively felt, indeed both "academic" and "sacred."



Christian Eckart, Illumination—Gray, 1987. *Mixed media and 22-carat gold leaf on plywood, 72 x 84". Courtesy Massimo Audiello Gallery.*

◀ Christian Eckart, Detail Painting #519, 1987. *23-carat gold leaf on wood and frame, 25¾ x 27½". Courtesy Massimo Audiello Gallery.*



Christian Eckart, Icon-Type #801, 1987. *23-carat gold leaf on panel with moldings, 90 x 66". Courtesy Massimo Audiello Gallery.*

Christian Eckart explores this territory which we may delineate as Reinhardt's landscape of the sublime, creating objects which for some, not paradoxically, may be taken as something transcendental. His project is beyond the rhetoric of the simulacra. His materials, motifs, and motives seems so culturally suggestive and "influenced" as Peter Schjeldahl describes Brice Marden's recent work that the artist endeavors to subvert these paradigmatic indicators of significance, disclosing instead a whole reservoir of untapped meaning.

Eckart's definitive sealants for his paintings such as gold and aluminum leaf, his pictorial configuration no less spiritually suggestive than the cruciform, even his impossible notion of an "Illumination" *painting* all bring to light what the artist calls "transhistorical metabelief systems": points of reference or paradigms in painting and art in which we as subjects—the "socialized" art-viewing public—have invested belief, predisposing ourselves to receive the art object in very specific ways. Thomas Kuhn defines a paradigm as any "universally recognized (scientific) achievement that for a time provides model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners."[2] As a constructive practitioner, Eckart locates, interprets, and then sets about to disclose the manipulative mechanics of these culturally predetermined "meaning imperatives." He thereby displays the historical integrity of something as it was seen in its own day and then subsequently historicized through the filter of criticism.

Deeming what it is not, the "nonobjective" or "nonfigurative" art appear to read as negative terms to describe Eckart's paintings; yet as labels they cannot undermine the fundamentally constructive or positive attitude in his project. His paintings disclose and negate paradigms rather than critiquing preexisting or antiquated moral or social conditions and, as such, they should be seen as affirmative statements. As scientist, Eckart does not aim to create new theories per se: instead, "normal (scientific) research is directed to the articulation of those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies."[3] Eckart's mission is both respectful of and iconoclastic to his loaded models, subversive in its maximalism yet also reserved in its formal articulation.

Our insight into Eckart's work lingers metaphorically halfway between verbalization and visualization. As in the interpretation of a Jasper Johns painting, Eckart's product is to be read and deconstructed as a text; and, like Johns, Eckart does not entirely disregard the painterly gesture which is so emblematic of an artist's manual mastery. In the end, though, Eckart bids for a representation of an abstract fiction to which his idea or concept is more crucial than any perfunctory or fabricated execution. His conceptually built paintings represent those ideals which underline and contribute to our notion of the abstract.

For his leafed "Martyr" paintings, an ongoing body of work, Eckart deploys a fundamentally post-Modern object in order to place himself into a mainline history of what he refers to as "continental modernism." The shape of these images deviates both from a rectangular form as well as from the cruciform which Rosalind Krauss describes as the "most primitive sign of an object in space: the vertical of the figure projected against the horizon of an implicit background."[4] Francis Bacon also describes this form in anthropomorphic terms: as an "armature on which to hang feelings about behavior and the way life is."[5] As in Krauss's, Bacon's empathetic description of the fundamental cruciform type embraces the human body as something preexistent, implicit in both the artwork and in its interpretation. We will see that Eckart's painting is absolutely an anthropomorphic entity despite its resistance to this measured archetype.

As shaped paintings, there is both a structural and symbolic unity between the shape of support and the painted image depicted within. His sealants—gold and aluminum leaf—enhance this dialogue between the literal features of the picture's support and the image's illusion in that they lock and virtually embalm each gesture, effectively highlighting each stroke with an almost photographic clarity. Underneath this evenly gilded surface exist both the smallest mark and the articulation of a gestural image painted in an exaggeratedly antigestural manner reminiscent of Lichtenstein's overscaled "abstract" strokes. Heralded with an illustrious gold coat, these often overdetermined marks also recall Richter's optical projections of small gestural sketches for his photoabstractions of 1977–80. Both Lichtenstein and Richter are two artists, who, like Eckart, explore the "meaning imperatives" of their work to the extent that issues such as style, even process, dissolve

into epistemological isometrics. One only has to examine Eckart's material structure to confirm this attitude towards picture-making.

The mouldings for these "Martyr" paintings, for example, suggest contemporary sources though they clearly relate to ornamental, Baroque motifs. These bulbous forms provide not only a curvilinear dimension to his gridlike format; they also lend a particular architectonic quality to the painting, measuring the distance between object and its wall support. Often painted in a post-Modern design palette of lush, perfumed, and confectionary hues, these constructed mouldings act more as painterly devices than as framing components. Seen from the side, the profile of these mouldings brings to the fore the essential form of the painting's construction and almost recall the architectonic imagery depicted within a Léger painting of the early '20s. The Utopian projections of Léger become Eckart's decisive means of support, his commodification of the former's belief system. Once again, the artist represents points in modernism where we seek some sort of spiritual or material truth, negating or challenging these ideals through his formal contradictions and complexities. In the end, the works become self-incriminating, their formal characteristics cancelling each other out. Through their formal deconstruction of themselves, the paintings yield Eckart's critically modernist attitude of opposition.

In our perspectival reading of his paintings, his mouldings also bare an affinity to Mondrian and his theory of "pure relations" and "plasticity." As consistently sized units of expression, Eckart's mouldings seem to flatten our space, denying the full release of his brand of atmospheric, almost trecento, perspective in shape, mass, and even color. In the overlapping gridlike forms of Mondrian's late work, our cue for depth comes through only on the surface of the canvas. Yet as Meyer Schapiro affirms: "in this art which seems so self-contained and disavows in theory all reference to a world outside the painting, we tend to complete the apparent forms as if they continued in a hidden surrounding field and were segments of an unbounded grid."[6] In other words, Mondrian opposes the pure relations in his art with the implied or veiled representations which extend beyond his paintings.

Eckart's superrealized surfaces of his deviation from a cruciform or rectangular grid structure certainly prompt comparison with Mondrian's system of pure relations. Still, it is his mouldings which choreograph the viewer through the work, confining one to surface and edge so that, yet again, Eckart ultimately produces a self-incriminating painting. These "frames" direct the eye from the curing shape of the support to an area of the wood grain revealed within to the encased painted imagery. Through this visual tour around the three indeterminate sides of the picture, we are deprived of any illusion beyond the materiality of the picture as witnessed to be discretely available in a Mondrian. In this way, Eckart overthrows Mondrian's paradigm, indicating a shift in received ideas about illusion and plasticity. Here, Eckart fabricates a lie, disclosing not the "rhetoric of the fake" but the fakeness of the "real."

In Greek mythology a beautiful youth, Narcissus, was beloved by a guileless nymph named Echo. When he repulsed her, caring for no woman's love, the goddess Juno punished him by causing him to fall fatally in love with his own reflection. Perhaps one's neurotic obsession with one's own person is the subject of Eckart's art. His paintings seem to leave the viewer with nothing but a sense of himself–herself in front of the artwork, the spectator as his/her own objet trouvé. They confront the viewer, daring one to create something out of nothing. Automatically anthropomorphic in scale, his paintings anticipate both a specific audience and its predetermined response. Christian Eckart attempts to reconstruct Barnett Newman's often quoted passage: "Man's first expression like his first dream, was an aesthetic one. Speech was a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication. Original man, shooting his consonants, did so in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness, at his own helplessness before the void."[7] □

1. Barbara Rose, "Gregory Battock," *Art News*, January 1960.
2. Thomas Kuhn, *The structure of Scientific Revolutions* p. viii. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1972.
3. Ibid., p. 24.
4. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, p. 264. MIT Press 1983.
5. Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon* Tate Gallery, p. 19. London 1985.
6. Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art in the 19th and 20th Century*, p. 238, George Braziller, New York 1978 reprint.
7. Barnett Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist."