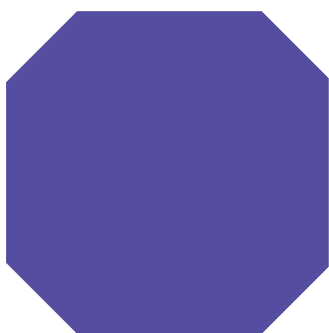


the rothko chapel

artwork & space



**the
rothko
chapel**

ARTWORK AND SPACE

by Rita Reis Colaço

Research followed by Sébastien Quequet in order to obtain
the diplome in Master in Space & Communication
at Haute École d'Art et de Design de Genève

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I.

Introduction

When I concluded my studies on Product Design, I realized that I was much more aware of the space and the environment created through the relation of elements present than just the objects themselves. This interest led me to become very attentive to museum spaces, more specifically to the relation between the space and the artwork and how the space around an artwork influences its observation. I have come to realize that an artwork doesn't exist without a space around it; an artwork needs a space to live on and to be observed on. Different criteria and intensity express this relation, but, on my understanding, every artwork has a space that surrounds it and only with this space it can be observed and sensed in its full potential, becoming a crucial element of it. Space has a fundamental role on the observation of art, changing completely its interpretation in accordance to its environment.

During the Abstract Expressionist period, this question of the bridge between the space and the artwork had a particular significance. The artists who really emphasized this, such as Barnett Newman (1905-1970), Jack Pollock (1912-1956), Clyfford Still (1904-1980) and specially Mark Rothko (1903-1970), the most concerned one with this matter, developed a rigorous posture towards the space in which his work should remain, making it a central point of his creations, while assuming a merging state between the space and the artwork.

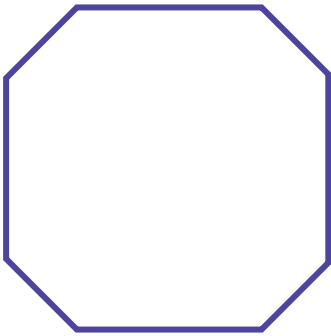
In order to analyse this interaction, I chose the Mark Rothko's Chapel in Houston as a Case Study. In this project the artist is responsible, since the foundation of the installation, for the paintings and the space that surround them in a simultaneous way. This process of working

concurrently took my attention and brought me to initiate my study analysis. Based on this idea, my intention is to highlight a selection of the domains in which I feel this interaction is relevant, presenting a possible understanding of the relation between these elements. For this analysis, after reading several different books and opinions of art historians who worked intensively on this subject, I decided to keep a selection of them, basing my study on only few documents that, on my understanding, would follow interesting analysis' thoughts in order to answer to the question of the artwork, as a whole, as I intend through this interpretation. This selection remained mostly and more importantly on the art historian Sheldon Nodelman, then Susan J. Barnes, David Anfam, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro and Wessel Stoker, that I believe obey to an objective, well structured, rigorous and connected study between them. Their way of envisioning and analysing the chapel brought me the necessary knowledge to choose into which direction I intended my study to remain and through it, to create my own opinion in order to build coherent analyses and take possible conclusions regarding the creative process of the artist and the way he constructed the merging interaction between the artwork and the elements around it.

The study is divided into two distinct parts: the first one presents an historical contextualisation of the commission and its origins; and the second presents a clear analysis of the chapel's space and artwork. The first part aims to expose and explain the conditions in which the chapel was created in order to be useful for the comprehension and context of the transformations and decisions taken on the installation process. It is interesting to observe the balance created between the artist intentions in confrontation with the commissioner's expectations/obstacles and how it influences the artistic creation of the interveners. Further on, in a second part, a deeper analysis, as a dissection of a selection of some of the chapel's elements as well as the emotional and meaningful intention beyond the aesthetic aspects will be presented.

My intention through this research is to give a contribution for the understanding of the artwork as a whole, questioning of how and where the relation between space and artwork is created in the Rothko Chapel. This framework will enable understanding some elements when creating a possible answer on and from the observer. Further, the painter's artistic creation will be analysed in relation to elements that became an almost obsession for the artist: the structure, the chromatic organization, the interior light, among other elements categorized and analysed along

this study. In a synthetic way, this study aims to be a starting point for a contribution of ideas and certain conclusions for the question of the artwork as whole: the object itself and space around it.



II.
The
Chapel
Commission

1. The chapel of all tensions

Patronage as a Vocation

Dominique (1908-1997) and John (1904-1973) de Menil were a French-American couple, living in Houston, Texas. They were philanthropists and collectors of art, having founded “The Menil Collection”, in 1987, an art museum in Houston, which accommodates their own collections. In the 1940s Dominique de Menil, under the influence of a friend, the Dominican Father Marie-Alain Couturier (1897-1954), who had a strong inclination towards the “Art Sacré”, became very interested in art¹. The couple’s influence in town kept growing and they strengthened their liaison to the University of St. Thomas, a small catholic liberal arts college². Thus, the idea of building a chapel at the University premises started emerging as a natural consequence of their will to continuously contribute to the cultural enrichment of their environment. The influence of Father Couturier and the *Art Sacré* movement seemed to be vital, following the example of what was happening in France: “in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the realization of the four great modern religious monuments of France: the churches at Assy and Audincourt, which contain works by George Braque, Fernand Léger, Jacques Lipschitz and George Rouault, among others; the Matisse chapel at Vence; and Le Corbusier’s church at Ronchamp”³. So, thanks to Dominique and John de Menil’s desire, the commission of Rothko’s chapel became a reality and its construction was about to happen. However, they probably did not anticipate what was coming their way...

The Architect and the Artist

Dominique and John de Menil invited the architect Philip Johnson (1906-2005) to design the chapel on the campus of the University of St. Thomas.

Choosing him was obvious, because since 1957 he had been responsible for the overall architectural master plan program for the campus of the University⁴. Philip Johnson was one of the luminaries of American architecture of the post-war period. His connection to the de Menils started around the 40's with the project of their residence in Houston, built in 1948-49. His work was very admired and during the 1970's and 80's he became one of America's most famous skyscraper architects⁵.

Mark Rothko, a Russian Jew having for birth name Marcus Rothkowitz, belonged to a family who immigrated to Oregon, United States, during his youth. Later on, in 1923, Rothko moved to Manhattan where he lived for the rest of his life. Rothko is considered an "abstract expressionist" artist and can be seen as one of the most well known post-war American artists. As the majority of the artists, throughout his career he changed a lot the way he worked: his artworks passed through different periods, ideas, representations and meanings. During the 1930s and 40's, Rothko painted human forms; then, in the middle of the decade, he essentially abandoned these identifiable representations. Only on the 1950's, he reached an abstract forms arrangement that he developed later on during his career.

Johnson and Rothko had previously had the opportunity to work together in 1958, when the painter was invited by the architect to execute a suite of paintings for the interior of the Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram Building in New York⁶. In 1960, two years after accepting the project, Mark Rothko decided to withdraw it. The painter didn't agree with the circumstances under which his pictures were to be observed⁷. Mark Rothko became very exigent regarding this kind of matters. After this episode, he decided to only accept projects where he would be the sole artist exhibiting in the room and where he could demand precise hanging and lighting conditions and even sometimes where he could participate directly in the installation process.

The Commission

Dominique and John de Menil visited Mark Rothko for the first time in 1960, in his studio in Bowery, New York. At that time, Rothko was preparing the Seagram/Four Seasons project; a full-size mock-up was in display and paintings were hanging within. The de Menils were impressed by Rothko's working method, using a real scale mock-up. Therefore, when, in 1964, the idea of building a chapel at the St. Thomas

University became more consistent, the University board, under the de Menils' recommendation, invited Mark Rothko to create the murals for the chapel. On April 17 1964, the institution and the couple invited the painter Mark Rothko and the architect Philip Johnson to conduct the project of the chapel. They both accepted the commission and the project started on September that same year. This chapel project represented a lot to Rothko. It was a great opportunity that the painter had been hoping for: it was his possibility and unique chance to finally determinate all the space around his creations, from the foundations of the building to the smallest fine points, shaping all the structure in a new level of precision⁸. Although, one might ask where would Mark Rothko "place" Philip Johnson in all his vision.

2. To build or not to build?

Between 1964 and 1971, the process of deciding the right location, the design of the building and the institution to whom they were affiliated with, underwent a number of changes and proved to be a lot more difficult than expected. Originally conceived as a chapel for the University of St. Thomas, it was meant to be a catholic chapel. Unfortunately, the several personalities involved were not in accordance with each other and in 1969, after some disagreements between the de Menils and the St. Thomas administration regarding the future of the University, it was decided collectively to end their partnership. Since the chapel project was already very advanced, the idea of withdrawing the chapel commission did not make any sense for the de Menils.

The couple decided to go forward with it and find another institution which to donate the chapel to. Meanwhile, John de Menil belonged to the board of the Institute of Religion and Human Development, based on Houston's Texas Medical Center, and he had a close working relationship with its President. So, in August 1969, the Institute of Religion and Human Development, an ecumenical institution, accepted the donation for the construction of the chapel. However, the Institute didn't have any land available for the project construction. After several attempts to find a solution, the de Menils settled for the construction of the chapel in a piece of property in Houston owned by themselves. Almost ironically, the land was in the west neighbourhood of St. Thomas University campus.

Apparently these details didn't change the board mind. The Institute accepted the idea and the project went ahead. It is important to highlight that this recent association with the Institute changed the course of the chapel, making its focus become ecumenical, such as its new institution. At the same time these changes were taking place, the project plans for the construction of the chapel were progressing: Mark Rothko's series of pictures were concluded and the decisions between the artist and the architect were also already very advanced, so these institutional and location changes didn't interfere with the artist's and architect's project. In February 27 1971, the chapel was dedicated as "a sacred place open to all, every day"⁹. The Institute for Religion and Human Development and the Rothko Chapel were affiliated until 1972, when the Institution decided that the chapel should be separated from it, for the full development of its potential.

On October 3, 1972 the chapel was baptized "The Rothko Chapel, Incorporated", "to provide a place of worship, a place of meditation and prayer for people to gather and explore spiritual bonds common to all"¹⁰. It became the world's first broadly ecumenical centre, a holy place open to all religions and belonging to none.

3. Tensions, changes and relations generated by the commission through the project

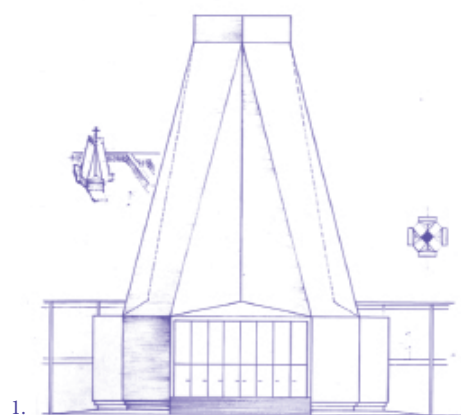
"The great architect bowed out to the great artist"¹¹ was the perspective and expectation created by the commissioner Dominique de Menil while forming this collaboration. Johnson and Rothko had quite different and very distinct ways of working and, more than ever, for this specific project. These two artists were very enthusiastic and ambitious so, despite their divergences, during the first seven months of planning, they arrived to a solution for the interior of the chapel together. The next step was to create the exterior shape of the chapel: their focus centred in the height of the ceiling and in handling the light sources. Unfortunately, this joint-project brought together two very different, almost opposed, remarkably strong personalities, with very distinctive artistic visions. During this first part of the venture, Johnson showed to be very courteous to Rothko's ideas concerning the interior decisions of the building¹². One could say that he had reserved the exterior form of the chapel to become his own creation having understood the interior as a collective work with Rothko. Nevertheless, as the project advanced, Rothko didn't show to be

as appeasing as Johnson. And the consequence was that the shape of the interior of the chapel evolved from a square, as Johnson's initial intention, to an octagon affecting the exterior form irreversibly. Johnson was pressured to somehow change the exterior structure of the building, since Rothko's interior octagonal configuration was approved.

In the fall of 1964, Mark Rothko and Philip Johnson had a lot of opposite ideas concerning the architecture's powerlessness of the building, the "height and mass" were their major themes of contention sources. Johnson's envisioned since the beginning of the project to have a surmounted tall pyramid on the top of the building (*figs.1,2*). The de Menils were obliged to take a decision for the task to move on, ending up by taking Mark Rothko's side¹³. Since this decision was taken, Johnson altered his plans so as to respond to Mark Rothko's criticisms and ideas (*figs.4,5*). After submitting to the requests and changes made by the painter and having his ideas refused a number of times, Philip Johnson decided to retire from the project. By November 1967, he wrote a letter to the de Menils asking that his name would henceforth be dissociated from the project since "it is far from anything I would do"¹⁴.

Philip Johnson left in charge Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry, who had been the supervising architects since the beginning of the project. These architects carefully followed Rothko's ideas, closing the chapel project with a final octagonal simple plan in a brick structure, such as the painter wanted since its start. After Rothko's death in 1970, Barnstone also had to abandon the project due to his illness, leaving Aubry in total charge of it. Aubry asked Philip Johnson to help as a consultant to design the main entrance of the chapel, as well as the windows that bring daylight into the vestibule. Philip Johnson accepted, becoming involved in the project once more, turning out to be also responsible for the alignment of the chapel on the new site¹⁵. Meanwhile, in 1969, Dominique and John de Menil purchased Barnett Newman's controversial Broken Obelisk (*fig.9*), dedicated it to Martin Luther King, Jr. and placed it in front of their Rothko Chapel. Philip Johnson designed the reflecting pool for Barnett Newman's sculpture.

In conclusion, the two artists – Johnson and Rothko - experienced the opportunity to join their skills, expertise and creativity in the same project, but crafting a balanced bridge between these two strong personalities was impossible. Ironically, in the end, the Rothko Chapel only exists due to the work and persistence of these two men and de Menils.



3.

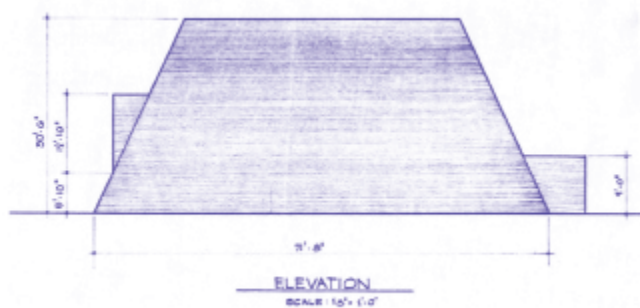


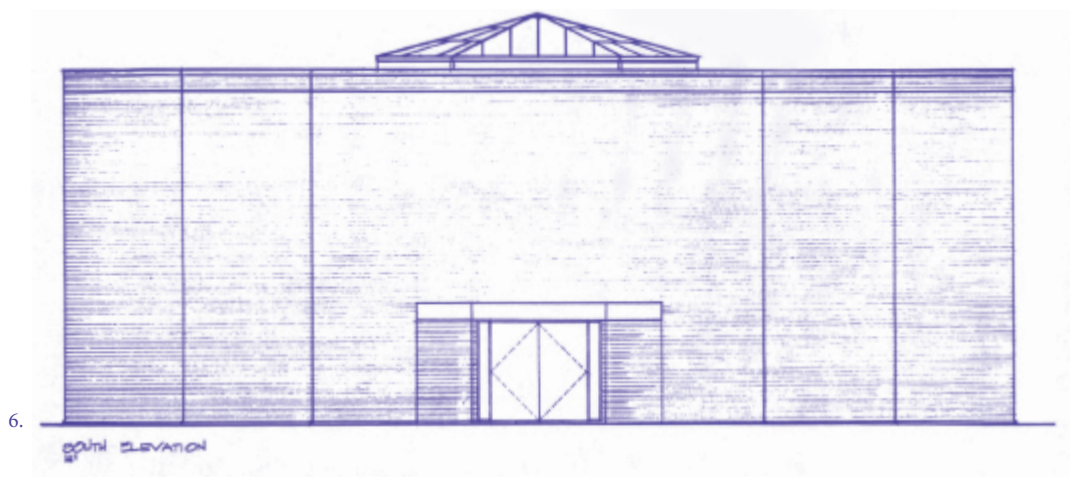
Philip Johnson's octagonal plan elevation (fig.1)
and a scale model of the octagonal plan
of the chapel in 1965 (fig.2 and fig.3)

4.

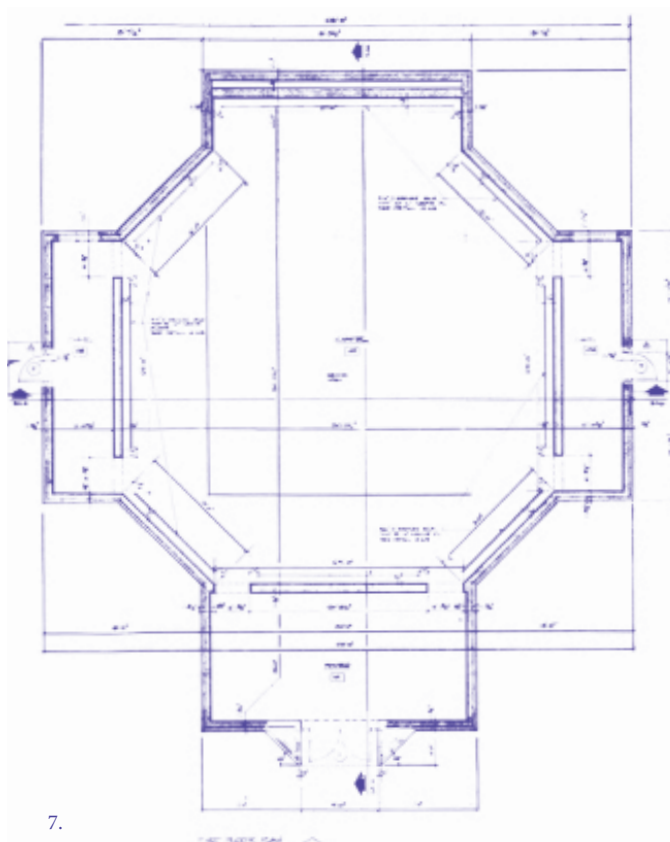


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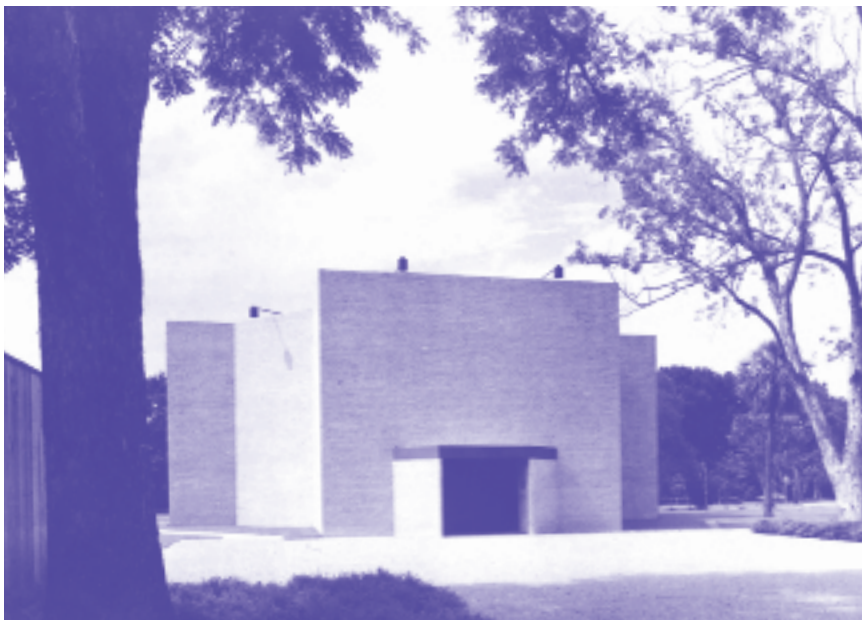




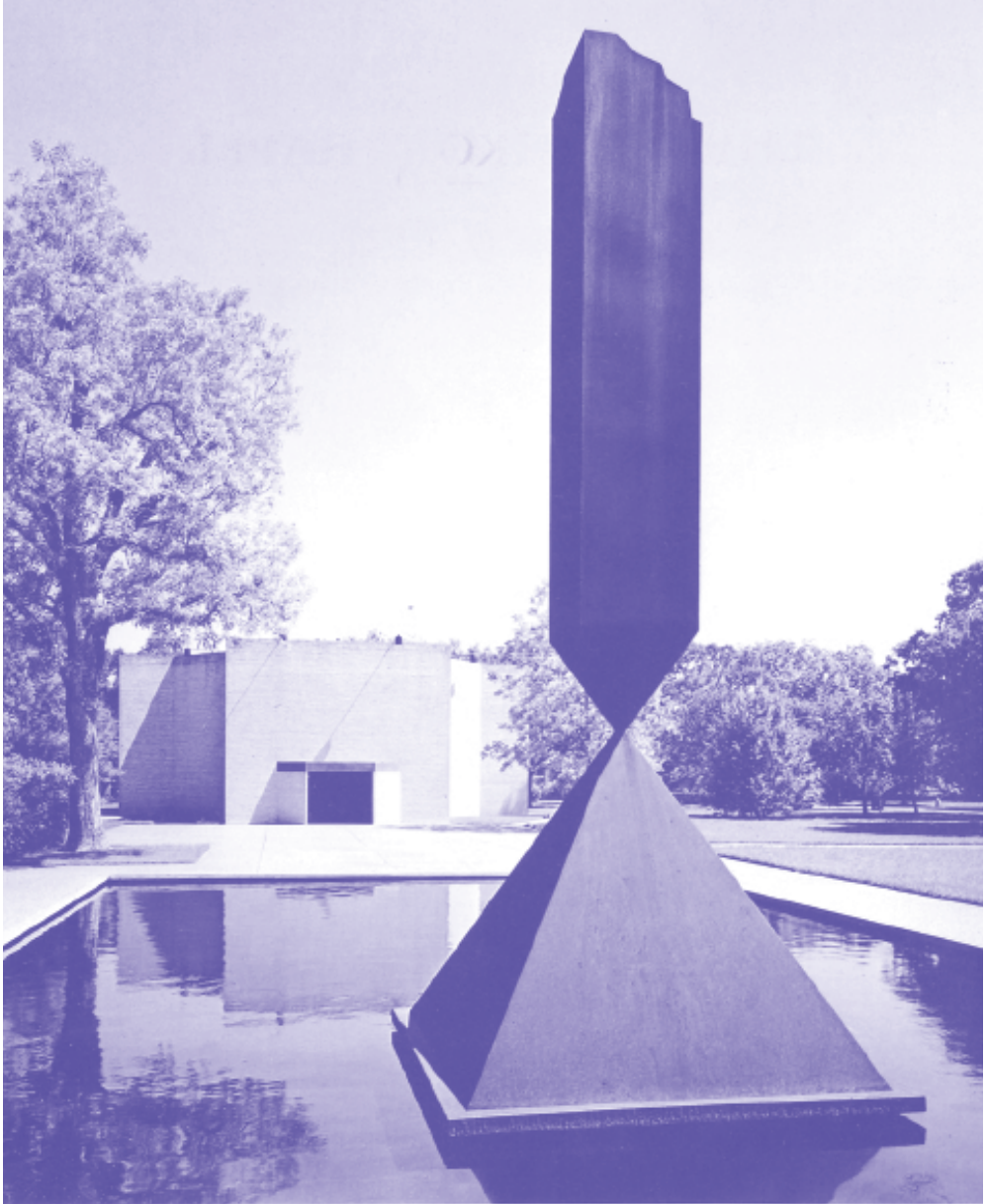
Philip Johnson shortened pyramid elevation in 1965 (fig.4). Philip Johnson truncated pyramid elevation in 1967 (fig.5). Barnstone and Aubry elevation as the chapel was built in 1970 (fig.6)



Barnstone and Aubry plan as the chapel was built, in 1970 (fig.7)

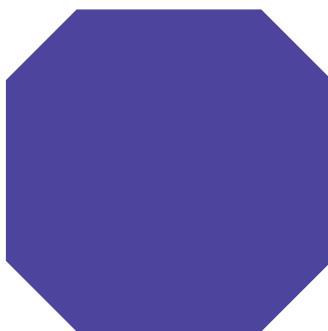


Rothko Chapel, exterior building, in 1971 (fig.8)



9.

Rothko Chapel with Barnett Newman's sculpture Broken Obelisk, 1963z-67 (fig.9)



III.

Artwork and Space

1

Mark Rothko and the Abstract Expressionism Movement

Mark Rothko belonged to the group of artists identified as “abstract expressionists”, a term which Rothko was not very comfortable with. It emerged after the Second World War, marking the end of the surrealism period and the beginning of profound changes in the development of the visual arts. Although a lot of brilliant artists were part of this collective endeavour, perhaps only a few concern us today. Among them, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still most drastically efficient the forms, approaches and the nature of what could establish painting. During this period, artists were interested on the existentialism questions, coming to contradict the absolute truths of knowledge, answers or definitive explanations; believing that life is a continuous series of subjective experiences that create a context of comprehension to which each person answers it on its own way¹⁶. At that period, art and exhibitions grew a lot, bringing a large number of people to museums. The influence of Europe in North America became very strong and around 1940's, especially in New York, this group of artists became famous in art world.

This group of “abstract expressionists” reoriented the conventional pictorial dynamics present on the artworks in the way the paintings were turned outwards, addressing directly to the spectator. The traditional way of exhibiting art was questioned by the artists, in matters such as the point of view to observe and expose it, aiming to fuse the experience of the painter with that of the observer. The environment around, the space beyond and in front of the painting became part of the field of the pictorial action, as much as the space inside the material limits of the picture.

These artists didn't intend to have any symbols or orientation referring to anything outside the artwork¹⁷.

Around 1940's, Rothko worked towards a new interpretation of space, light, and colour: hanging height, intervals/juxtapositions between paintings, placement of paintings within the interior architecture, colour of the wall surface, and more importantly, the character and power of the lighting, were matters that he focussed on while working for the chapel commission. For him, curating the space around the paintings became a crucial point of his art statement having turned into one of his strongest points throughout his career. This being very clear on his letter to the Whitechapel in 1961 (*annexe p.137-138*)¹⁸. Before having the opportunity to curate the chapel space, Mark Rothko refused several times his paintings to travel in circulating exhibitions, where he wouldn't be able to control their installation. The painter's sense of need for a strong connection between the painting and the viewer brought him to dislike group exhibitions that, in his opinion, would bring together a promiscuous mixture of works of diverse character of ambition¹⁹. The chapel project intended to be a distribution of elements in a systematic interaction with itself and with the architectural structure that evolves and supports the space around. Mark Rothko believed that the interaction between the painting and its environment were part of the artwork itself.

It is important to precise that there aren't a lot of documents in which the painter expresses his intentions or explanations towards the project, so, a lot of interpretations made in this investigation are taken from information of close friends, letters, assistants and people that had contact with the painter at this period²⁰. Different conclusions can be taken from these interpretations. Throughout this investigation, among several books and different analyses, a large selection of the few interpretations was made, specially the ones I supported the most, which express my own opinion.

2

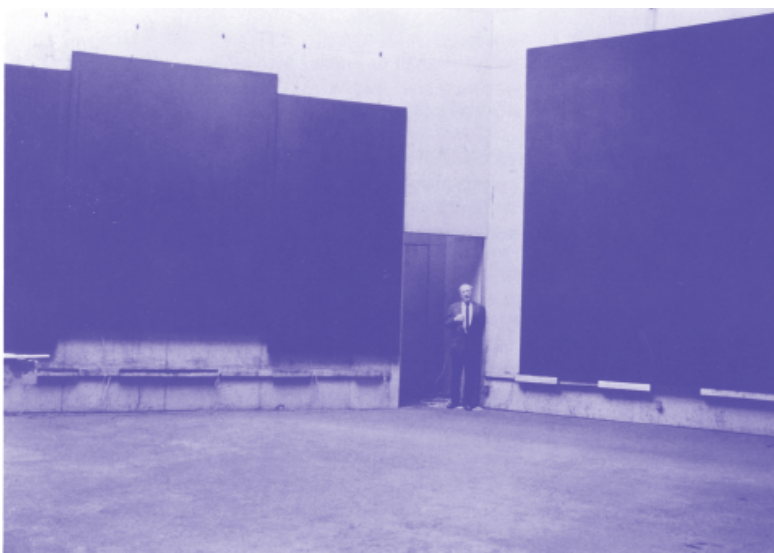
Anatomy of the interaction between the space and the artwork (inside the Rothko's chapel)

1. Scale/structure/disposition of elements in the chapel

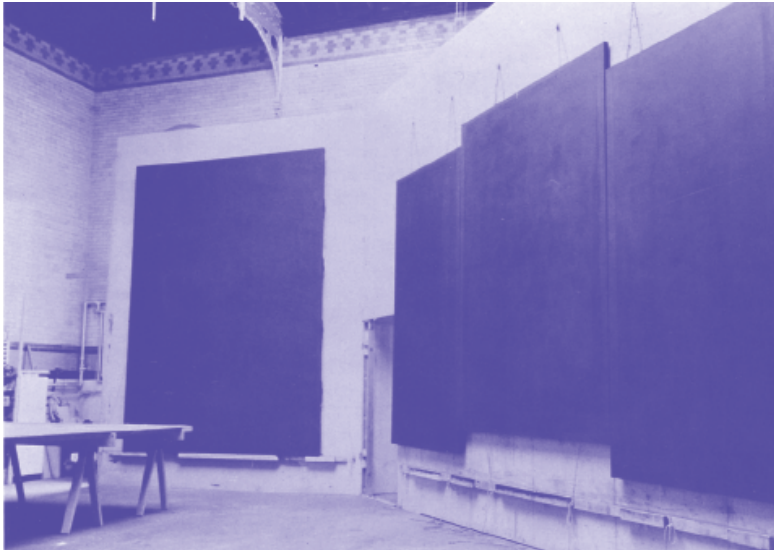
“I paint large pictures because I want to create a state of intimacy. A large picture is an immediate transaction; it takes you into it.” ²¹

Mark Rothko built a full-scale mock-up, in his studio at 69th St. in New York, of only three of the eight walls of the chapel (*figs.10,11*). Later on, the painter made another mock-up with the full shape of the chapel embodied. This second mock-up was much smaller than the full-sized one, representing the entire form with the eight walls. It was open at the bottom, large enough to put one's head inside and allowing him to have an involvement closer to the real interior structure of the chapel space. In my opinion, these mock-ups are very related with this search for the creation of “a state of intimacy”. Being a crucial characteristic on Mark Rothko's work, he created his own method of work to reach that. Mark Rothko was looking for a feeling of immersive experience brought to the viewer on the space, as “a state of being moved” ²² into it. Dissolving the arrangements and physical properties of the chapel into a vital transcendental experience on the observer. The painter also worked with plans and architect models for study arrangements.

Art critics ²³ explained that making use of the full-scale mock-up, Rothko worked with real scale size elements of the space, in order to try different arrangements with the exact measurements. He would use this working method to better understand the precise interaction between the walls, the size of the paintings, the relation and space between them, and all type of decisions linked to the form and space. Mark Rothko created



10.



11.

Rothko's 69th St. studio with completed angle-wall painting, May 1967 (fig.10)
Rothko's 69th St. studio with chapel paintings on pulley system, 1965 (fig.11)

a system of ropes and pulleys to move the paintings up and down on the walls where they were hanging. Each fine calibration of the modules of the space composition was made in relation to the walls made in real scale, as well as the proportion and scale regarding the space around the paintings. Rothko would spend hours contemplating each painting, “measuring with the eye and with the mind”²⁴.

Despite the intention that Philip Johnson had of using a square for shaping the chapel installation, since the early beginning of the project Mark Rothko intended the interior of the chapel to have an octagonal shape²⁵. This particular form – the octagon – merges both frontality and symmetry on a single space, both aspects also present on Rothko’s paintings. The octagonal shape (*diagram p.51*) allows interesting symmetries to arise with a rectilinear apse and a recessed floor, each section separated on eight principal units, having on its total fourteen paintings. The octagon space, in contrast to the typical rectangular room to which we are used to, offers a wraparound observing situation overtly centred upon the spectator, creating a strong architectural dynamic on the space. Although the chapel is not a regular octagon shape: its plan was created from the superimposition of two squares, one larger than the other, sharing a mutual centre and rotated with the angle of 45 degrees. From the centre of the space the spectator can view each painting squarely, from equal distance. The interior looks like a square without corners, with four shorter sides alternating between them²⁶.

The walls of the octagon meet at a gentle obtuse angle, allowing a transition from one painting to another and virtually encircling the viewer. On the north wall, the apse²⁷, and on the east and west walls there are triptychs similar to each other. On the south wall, a single thin vertical painting and to conclude the octagonal shape, there are four large paintings, each one on each diagonal wall. Within the symmetry of the octagonal space, Rothko created patterns of internal symmetry. For instance, the black-form triptychs that mirror each other on the east and west walls give a sombre, lateral symmetry: the four plum-coloured canvases that hang individually on the short walls, lend a radial symmetry to the arrangement. At the same time, they border the paintings contained on the long walls, making symmetrical groupings that distance from three walls. A certain distance is requested for the contemplation of the panels that retain the spectator, gradually revealing its context.

The planned distribution of space inside the chapel produces a state of envelopment inside the murals, which Rothko describes as

“immediate transaction”²⁸. It is possible to understand that Mark Rothko intended to create a space where there isn’t a hierarchic way to observe it. Contrary to most of sacred places this one doesn’t present a gradual order of importance between each element present inside the chapel. Actually, in this chapel, there isn’t an iconographic arrangement created on the structure of the chapel neither an emplacement dedicated for such liturgy. The observer is invited to feel the space in an encircling way, without having a clear beginning and end to the chapel elements. Neither a separation is made of the importance between the components and space. The observer is then conducted to create his/her own narration and interpretation of the chapel.

When once asked if colour meant more to him than any other element in his paintings Mark Rothko answered, “No, not colour, but measures”²⁹. Through the creation of monumental sized canvases, it is possible to understand that Mark Rothko tried to express a state of intimacy with the viewer through the use of a large scale. For Rothko, a large picture “creates an immediate transaction. It takes you into it”³⁰. Once the observer is immersed into the painting, the full clarification and contribution of the installation is defied since the artist’s suggestions have been removed. The sense of intimacy and invitation are contradicted by the abstraction and absence present on the space.

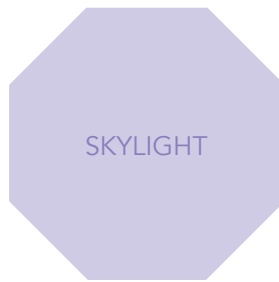
It is mainly around this idea, of playing with creating closeness through scale, that the painter was able to transmit most of the atmosphere he envisioned for the space. His murals occupy most of the walls surface, leaving only a very small skin of the wall around the canvases. This decision of leaving a thin frame around the paintings, create an almost merging state between the murals and the walls. According to Sheldon Nodelman, in *The Rothko Chapel Paintings: Origins, Structure, Meanings* (1997) “The idea of conjoining a pictorialized architecture with architectonic sized paintings so that pictorial and architectonic values are interfused continuously throughout the field of the installation has no apparent precedent in twentieth-century art”³¹. Rothko presented a conception where the wall segment became part of the picture itself and the surrounding structure and/or vice-versa, closing the borders between painting and architecture. Based on this idea, adding to the scale and form value, it is also possible to make a relation to the texture chosen for the paintings and walls, in which the contrast between them is almost none.

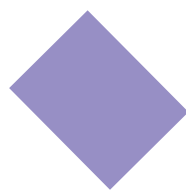
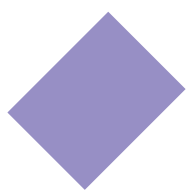
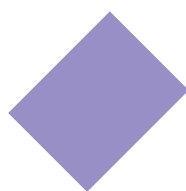
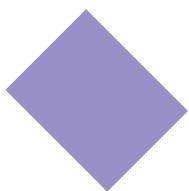
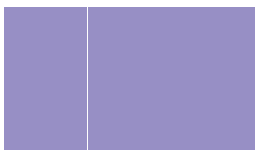
“Rothko’s ambition now had expanded to the entire surface of the interior, conceived as an integral unit within which the distinction between

painting and wall surface becomes secondary as the walls are pictorialized and the paintings rendered architectonic in function. The plan of the chapel interior is a primary factor in this pictorial/architectural dynamic³². These relations reinforce the close connection established by the painter regarding the composition, scale, shape, and placement between the painting and the walls³³. Further on, through each element analysis, we will understand that these invisible barriers are present on several components of the chapel installation. Mark Rothko didn't intend to make an usual distinction between these two supports, not wanting a distribution of functions diversely characterized. Instead, he wished to create an expanded and reduced space that generates a balance between opening and closing functions, which are repeatedly exchanged.

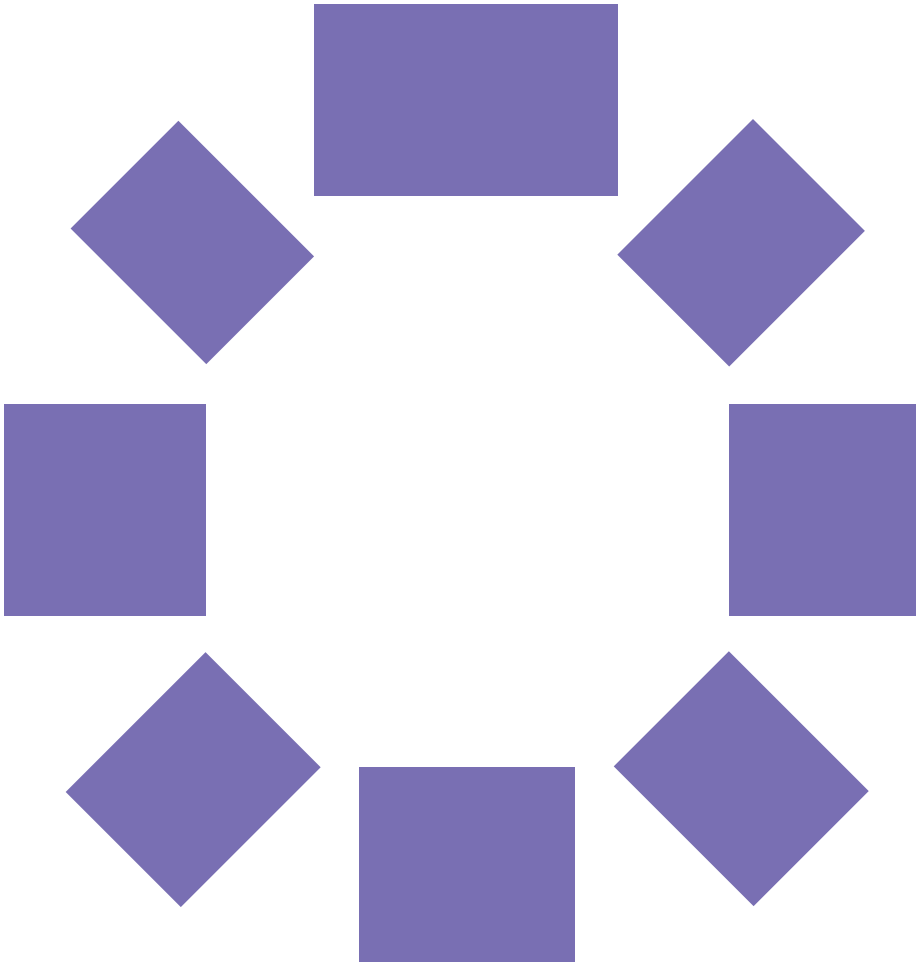
While making an analysis on the configuration of the murals on the chapel space, it is possible to make a separation into two groups of paintings: one is the three triptychs and the other the five single panels. It is also possible to interpret the canvases individually or as a large group, all together. Based on Mark Rothko's interpretation, the chapel paintings would need to be seen not only in themselves but also in their mutual coherence. The painter talks about his paintings as voices in an opera and he also drew an analogy with the stage³⁴. For him scale, structure and the disposition of the elements in the chapel had to function as a whole, an almost organic and interactive system. Ten years before the chapel project, in 1951, Mark Rothko makes a personal declaration in which he explains very clearly his regard towards the scale of the paintings (*annexe p.134*).

DIAGRAMMATIC PLAN OF THE CHAPEL

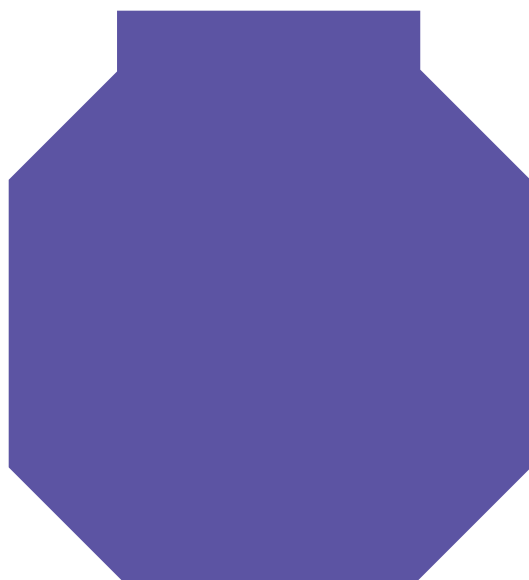




PAINTINGS DISPLAY



WALLS DISPLAY



FLOOR AREA

2. Chromatic Organization

“I’m not a colourist”³⁵

According to Robert Goldwater, *Reflections of the Rothko Exhibition* (1961), Mark Rothko didn’t like to be considered as colour-field³⁶ and would refuse to be called colourist, classifying colour as “ornamental” or “decorative”³⁷. Although it was, in part, through colour that he was able to control atmospheres and transmit the feelings and the emotions he intended.

Around 1950’s, Mark Rothko started a process of simplifying, his darkened palette and his pictorial textures grew deeper, values were divided, colours developed, and the edges of the rectangles became more firmly drawn. Since 1963, Mark Rothko started painting “black-forms”. The rectangular elements varied from dense black to a relative grey or brown tone; the ambience of the space created a balance between weight and tone. He adjusts proportions, researches the exact “weight” and hue needed for the texture to make it blend in the field. Inside the chapel, to create this atmosphere, it was needed to produce a balance between the colour, the shape and light of the elements present on it. Actually, the importance of the relationship between colour and light for Rothko throughout his career was so vital that he increasingly produced darker colour paintings to play with a certain amount of light reflecting on them, having dark colour and adjacent values the necessity for bright light to be distinct and therefore effective. This became a fundamental point on his work that assumed a relationship with the shadow, bringing especially on the chapel venture, a very particular atmosphere. Throughout his career, the artist’s palette changed to a more passive tonality, his interest in how light would be reflected from different surfaces become much more sensitive and his work became to a lot directed to this kind of matters.

For the realization of the murals Mark Rothko used a very precise technique of materials setting several coats of different components. In order to produce this process of painting, Mark Rothko needed to follow a large number of tasks: when the size and form of the canvas was decided, the initial task would be to apply two coats of oil paint (egg/oil emulsion) having the first layer be made of “dry pigments including ultramarine blue, bone black, and a synthetic red mixed with rabbit skin glue”. Then, the second layer consisted of “dry pigment and acrylic polymer diluted with water were brushed over the surface to darken the value”³⁸.

On the chapel installation, the paintings have only two colours: black and dark purplish mauve. While analysing it in terms of colour it seems clear to divide the fourteen paintings into two units such as: seven black rectangular against dark purplish background paintings and seven dark purplish mauve monochromes. We can consider that the two black triptychs on the long sidewalls could refer to the human existence in which Rothko constantly represents as tragic³⁹. In iconography, the colour black communicates death and mortality and in accordance to the meaning of colours in Christian art black, it is the colour of evil and death.

Regarding the chromatic organization of the paintings on the chapel space, if we consider the independence of the fourteen murals upon the eight walls, some relations can be identified: between the two black rectangular triptychs on the sidewalls and the four monochromes on the four short diagonal angle walls creating a symmetry on the space. It is also possible to consider this symmetry as a circulating repetition of two and four times on the space simultaneously. One can also identify a mirror effect between the black triptychs placed on opposite sides of the chapel while having similar forms between them. These examples of possible relations of the composition of the paintings on the space seems to me important to highlight since Mark Rothko doesn't express any type of symbols or narration through his murals.

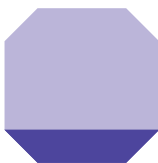
Concerning the material and colours of the interior structure of the chapel, Mark Rothko chose the floor to be made in asphalt blocks. He desired the walls to be unpainted surface with "sprayed-on plaster with a coat of water-based paint"⁴⁰ creating neutral colours in order to be resemble the mock-up walls he had on his studio. On my understanding, these choices would reveal the interest the painter had on creating a noticeable attention to the murals and simultaneously avowing a possible narration and interpretation on the structure intentions of the chapel.

While making a general analysis of the chromatic choice on the chapel composition, as the painter believed, colour didn't interest him. He wasn't concerned with it and didn't want people to make judgments linked to it. In contradiction to the detailed interpretation on the colour choice of the chapel, on my understanding Mark Rothko wouldn't desire it or even expect it from the viewers. The use of colour that Rothko does is mainly focused on the general atmosphere and deep feelings the observers would sense while entering and contemplating the chapel.

My personal understanding of it is that, if it was possible he wouldn't have chosen any colour that could have a connotation or be

related to anything that happened before the chapel's existence. Rothko didn't want it in order to prevent the chapel from any iconographic or deeper interpretation that would connect it to other meanings, besides the experience and ordinary feeling the viewer have while confronted with the space (including a blended experience with the artwork, space and every detail present on the space). Such as Mark Rothko expressed in 1943, while talking about his and Adolph Gottlieb's artworks: "It is not their intention either to create or to emphasize a formal colour-space arrangement. They depart from natural representation only to intensify the expression of the subject implied in the title"⁴¹ one can comprehend my interpretations.

N
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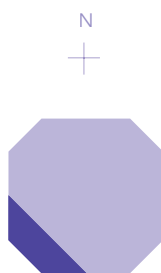


SOUTH



12.

Mark Rothko, Untitled [south entrance-wall painting], 1965. Rothko Chapel, Houston



N
+

SOUTHWEST

13.



Mark Rothko, Untitled [southwest angle-wall painting], 1966. Rothko Chapel, Houston





Mark Rothko, *Untitled [west wall black figure triptych]*, 1966-67. Rothko Chapel, Houston

N
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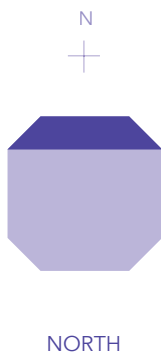


NORTHWEST



15.

Mark Rothko, Untitled [northwest angle-wall painting], 1966. Rothko Chapel, Houston

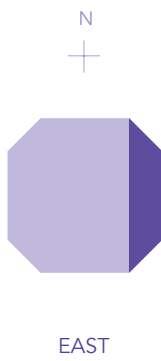






Mark Rothko, Untitled [north wall apse triptych], 1965. Rothko Chapel, Houston







Mark Rothko, Untitled [east wall black-figure triptych], 1966-67. Rothko Chapel, Houston





19.

Mark Rothko, Untitled [southeast angle-wall painting], 1966. Rothko Chapel, Houston

3. Interior Light

“It’s light I’m after”⁴²

According to numerous descriptions, Mark Rothko was highly exigent on the way his paintings were enlightened and hanged. For him, it was crucial to perceive the light and its constant movement on the canvas. He would spend a large amount of time until he felt the balance between the painting, the light, the hanging, the shade and atmosphere reached a feeling of fulfilment as a whole that would finally satisfy him. The art historian Nodelman also believes that the light was a vital aspect on Rothko’s work when he writes “The artist wanted to adapt his art to the environment existent, a place where the artworks could reflect, amplify and reinforce the theme of assemble. The intervention of the artist is so well erased that, under a good enlighten, the artworks look like apparitions, a strong impression of it”⁴³.

Light was the medium of manifestation for Rothko’s murals, being the main performer in the chapel interior space. While designing the space distribution, Rothko focused a lot his work on finding a solution in which the intensity and the degree of constancy of the light were well calibrated, responding to his intention. It was through searching for a good balance of light that Rothko tried to achieve the atmosphere he intended for the chapel space. Rothko wished his paintings to be seen with a dim light. Since he forbade artificial light, the painter asked for a central lantern skylight, a similar arrangement to the one he had in his studio, in New York. The light he intended would fill the chapel and appear as an element to give a floating suspended impression on the paintings.

Since light was one of his strongest concerns, Rothko envisioned to create a strong feeling on the spectator on the moment he entered the chapel. The visitor who was outside, exposed to the bright Texas light would be hit by the diffuseness of light, with the contrasting darkling experience highlighted by the separation from the exterior to the interior of the building. This involvement could be compared to the theatrical transition from light to shade, bringing a “special sense of solitude”⁴⁴ to the chapel atmosphere. Rothko took all the decisions regarding the lighting of the chapel based on the real scale mock-up used inside his studio in Manhattan.

One year before the conclusion of the chapel construction, Mark Rothko committed suicide, ending up by never visiting the place where the

chapel intended to be built, nor even Houston. After all, it is ironic to think that Rothko gave such importance to the light on the chapel venue, taking such meticulous decisions based on its behaviour but, in the end, he has never visited the place and never realised the dissimilarity of light between New York and Houston. There is obviously a clear difference between what Rothko intended to do and the final result. Rothko's close friends and people who visited his studio during the progression of the work said he would not be satisfied with it.

On the chapel structure, the ceiling height and sizes of the skylight have been established in accordance to Rothko's requests (*fig.20*). Only in a certain period of the day and under certain weather conditions, a pillar of light that would emerge from the ceiling to fill the central space of the chapel, could be correctly used. If relying on the chapel natural light, the illumination was subdued even on a bright day. This natural light system built inside the space forced the chapel to be on continuous transformation, due to the modifications on the directions, strength, and quality of the light caused by the seasonal alterations. In order to solve this failed plan, the light of the chapel has been studied and changed several times, but never successfully fixed. Some years after the opening of the chapel, a light-diffusing scrim was installed (*fig.21*), and later on, a baffle was added to "filter the direct it away from the central volume of the chapel towards the walls"⁴⁵ (*fig.22*).

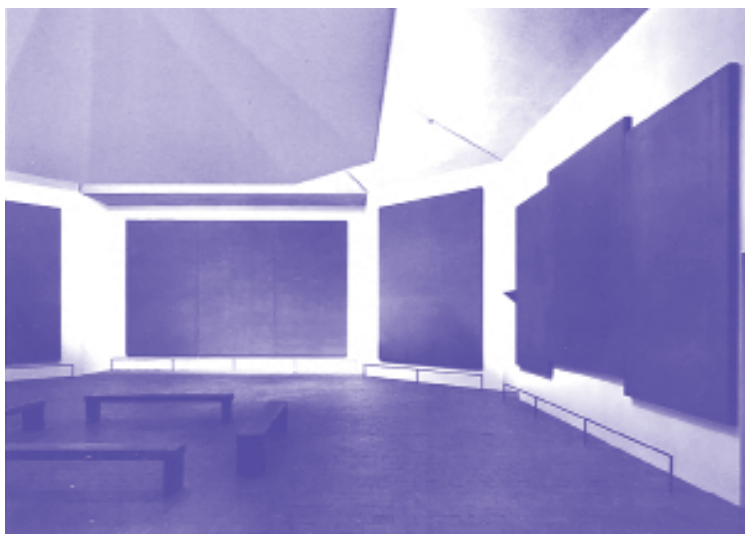


20.

Interior of the chapel, original skylight grid, in 1971 (fig.20)



21.



22.

Interior space of the chapel with a skylight scrim in 1974 (fig.21)
Interior space of the chapel with a skylight deflection baffle in 1976 (fig.22)
Visible changes concerning the skylight and enlightenment of the chapel
between the opening of the chapel and 1976.

3

Narration

“There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing... the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless”⁴⁶

It is by now already clear that both the artist and the architect involved on the project had strong ideas regarding their work, being Rothko an “abstract expressionist” part of the colour-field artists, and Johnson a radical modernist architect. Based on their position, it is understandable that the presence of narration and recognizable symbols wouldn’t be obvious. Their position on art, at this stage of their careers, when they made it, was already very clear regarding their intentions and message. Consequently, the narration is produced by the shape, organization and interaction of both paintings and architecture, in an abstract way. It is although particular to choose these two personalities for the construction of a chapel that, in the beginning, intended to be catholic.

Catholic chapels are usually places full of visible symbols and defined meanings, rules and intrinsic messages. In the early beginning of the commission, St. Thomas fathers demanded to include the symbols of the “Stations of the Cross” in the interior of the chapel. Mark Rothko agreed to adding cult objects, as long as there was no other piece of art inserted inside the chapel⁴⁷. Yet, the artist refused to have any symbol of the “Stations of the Cross” and instead suggested that, if they were absolutely necessary, these symbols could be included outside of the chapel. This agreement, however, was never needed, since by the time of its dedication the chapel had been converted on an ecumenical organization.

In 1940’s Mark Rothko painted mythical themes in a surrealist way with an intention of human forms. Together with Gottlieb⁴⁸, Mark Rothko

advanced a deep study on mythology and, in 1943, both artists wrote a letter⁴⁹ in which they explain in a very direct way what they aimed to transmit through their artwork (*annexe p.129-132*). Despite the fact that it was written twenty years before the chapel project, it could be considered in order to build ideas of Rothko's references on his later work, such as the chapel venue, and what he envisioned to conduct through it. "No possible set of notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker. The point at issue, it seems to us, is not an "explanation" of the paintings, but whether the intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures have significance"⁵⁰. His artworks become almost a critical language in which the principles were expressed effectively. He opted for excluding all the references or consensus reality, the field of the "probable and familiar"⁵¹, as he called it, looking for the exclusion of possible barriers between the painter, the idea and the viewer⁵².

For the chapel venue, historians consider that Rothko intended to transmit eternal symbols of the "human drama"⁵³, aiming to express the "infinite eternity of death"⁵⁴ on his paintings that would be related with his earlier concern about the basic human values of tragedy, ecstasy and doom. The monochromes on the short angles walls and the ones on the triptych in the apse could refer to transcendence⁵⁵; their monumental size and the religious form elements conduct us to interpret it this way.

Concerning the exact meaning of the chapel murals, Rothko never said much about it. In accordance with his conviction "silence is so accurate"⁵⁶, that he placed his confidence in the capability of his paintings to speak for themselves and to communicate directly with the observer. Mark Rothko was very focused on the matter of his canvases, "not a picture of an experience; it is an experience"⁵⁷, becoming a fundamental abstract style of purposes.

While thinking about a possible narration widen on the chapel disposition, it is possible to consider the analyse of the contrast between the entrance painting (*fig.23*) and the triptych present on the opposite side of the chapel (*fig.24*). The entrance painting can be distinguished from the other ones; it is taller than the other four single monochromes and much thinner. It is hanged on a large white wall much more isolated than the others, having a distinctive isolated position on the chapel. The painting is composed of a large vertical black rectangular form arranged at the top of the canvas, using a large part of it located against a dark purplish (or plum-coloured) background. This specific format of painting, vertical with elevated sides and tight base, was the setup used for iconic depiction in the

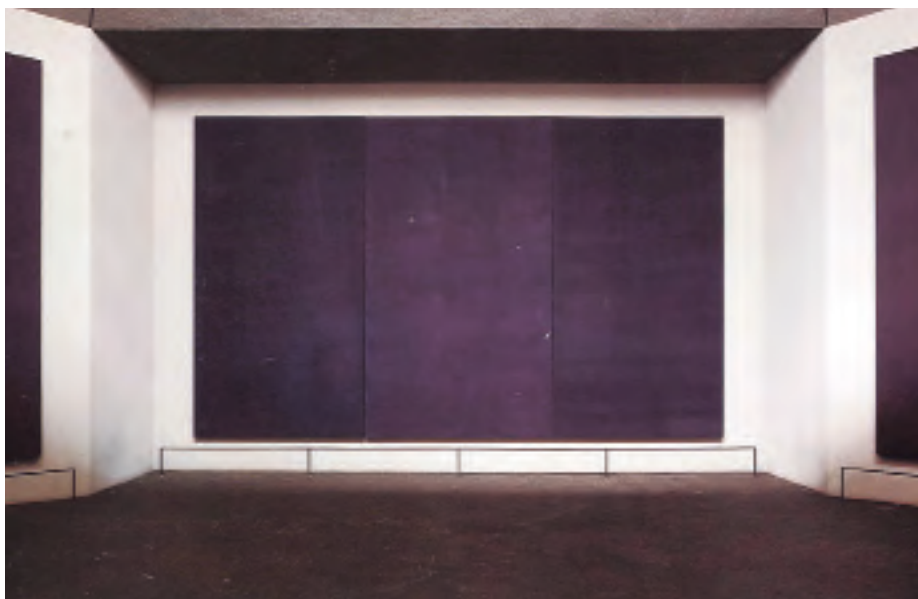
late Middle Ages. Nodelman interprets this painting as anthropomorphic, an impression of the human individual, referring to the arrangement of the image: the interior conflict among the painting as a whole and the contrasting black rectangular form.

As already mentioned, regarding the symmetries and repetitions produced on the analysis of the chromatic organization of the chapel murals, Wessel Stoker relates in *The Rothko Chapel Paintings and the Urgency of the Transcendent Experience* these examples by referring both to Nietzsche's concept of eternal return as well as to Kierkegaard's concept of repetition. To explain it in depth, the author depicts that the repetition in the chapel arrangement refers to a human choice of existence that begins in the daily life of the human being but is completed only in eternity. The repeating black triptych points to the necessity of the human being appropriating his past from the future, having the past present as possibility, a repetition that is completed only in eternity, which comes to expression in the repeating four monochromes of the angle walls⁵⁸. Effectively, Rothko was interested in Nietzsche's philosophy, this being mentioned by several historians⁵⁹ regarding different characteristics.



23.





24.





25.



26.

Large captures of the South (fig.25) and North (fig.26) panels of the interior space of the chapel

4

Religion

“Not a picture of an experience; it is an experience”⁶⁰

It is not possible to know Mark Rothko's exact intentions concerning the specific religion he envisioned to reference with the murals hung on the chapel, although I will try relate some of the references that might have had influenced him to take certain decisions⁶¹.

During the course of the chapel installation, Rothko often denied the exact significance of his paintings/installation, not giving a specific explanation of confessional approaches to it. Although one can consider that there isn't a clear line to a specific religion, through Mark Rothko's scripts we can understand that he had searched for a creation of religion based on experiences and beliefs. Rothko was brought into a search of religiousness while having some unforgettable sensations he felt when confronted with some sacred places. The most remarkable one, and only religious comment Mark Rothko ever made to Dominique de Menil, was when he visited the Byzantine basilica church of St. Maria Assunta at Torcello, in 1950⁶². The painter felt a strong emotion while confronted with the mosaic of the Last Judgement in the entrance of the church (*fig.28*) as well as with the Madonna and Child placed on the apse of the church (*fig.27*). Based on several historians⁶³, apparently inspired by this experience, Mark Rothko tried to create this same tension between the painting of the entrance to the chapel (*fig.23,25*) and to the one in its apse (*fig.24, 26*), as he felt in the basilica church, between the doom and the promise⁶⁴, caused by the opposition of a mosaic at the entrance opposite to the apse of the church. While traveling for the second time in Europe, in 1959, Mark Rothko visited Pompei and got aware of the profound affinity there was between his project and the Seagram Building

in the murals of the Mysteries in Pompei, having “the same large spaces of sombre colours”⁶⁵. Having the relation between the solid contrast of colours and the iconographic program of a general significance a crucial goal on Rothko’s interpretation⁶⁶. The same year Mark Rothko visited the Greek temples in Paestrum where he said that he had been painting Greek temples all his life without knowing it.

Mark Rothko was waiting for the opportunity to have his artwork exposed on a sacred place: “Like much of Rothko’s work they really seem to ask for a place apart, a kind of sanctuary where they may perform what is essentially a sacramental function... Perhaps, like medieval altarpieces [they] can properly be seen only in an ambience created in total keeping with their mood”⁶⁷. As Peter Selz wrote about the chapel’s paintings, Rothko believed that a contemplative environment was needed for his paintings to be exhibited.

The chapel, originally intended to be Catholic, ended up by being used for interreligious purposes. So, in part also influenced by this starting point, some critics defend that Rothko used origins from Christian religion, although they believe that Mark Rothko wasn’t thinking about only one specific religious tradition. While relating symbols of the church with decisions and shapes made by Mark Rothko on the chapel installation, a lot of connections can be shaped. One can consider the analysis of the junction of the two triptych’s centre panels, placed on the sidewalls of the chapel (*fig.29, 30*), as a suggestion of a cross together with the side panels. The triptychs are paintings consisting of three panels together, often used for altars in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. These ones have the middle panel in the centre and therefore larger than the side panels. Since the Romantic period, several artists haven’t made use of conventional Christian iconography to transmit religious transcendence⁶⁸, having created their own individual way to transmit religion, trying to shape their main goal around an idea to create emotion on the observer. The Islamic tradition is a strong example in which the religion is passible in other forms, using several ways to create a sacred atmosphere and always prohibiting iconographic representations. Mark Rothko’s use of myths from all different cultures in his earlier work already showed that he was looking for the universal in his search for eternal symbols of the human drama⁶⁹. With the chapel paintings, he wants to invoke a direct contact with the observer. This theory doesn’t contradict his use of form elements from the Christian tradition. Rothko used the above-mentioned Christian form elements to transmit what is religiously universal. We can say that Rothko

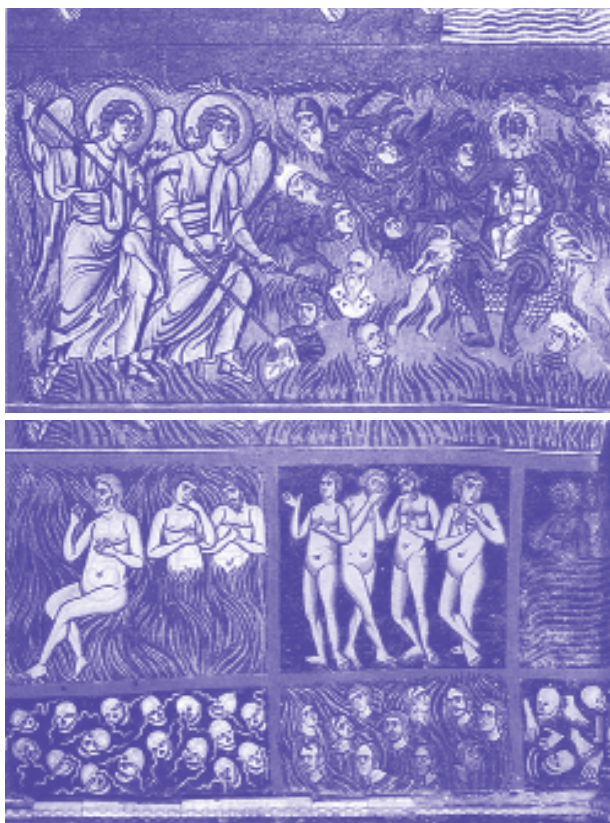
does not seek an alternative to traditional Christian iconography but makes liberal use of it. He uses religious traditions in general to give form to the universal human drama.

In 1952, Mark Rothko clarifies that “the progression of a painter’s work, as it travels in time from point to point, will be toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer [...] To achieve this clarity is, inevitably, to be understood”⁷⁰. His main concern would remain on “expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom”⁷¹ through which people would be affected when confronted with his murals and wanting them to have “the same religious experience I had when I painted them”⁷². While creating a connection between these statements and the chapel installation one can consider that Mark Rothko searched for the frontality of the religion experience provoked by his paintings on the viewer. Regarding to what Rothko believed, the painter necessities to have faith on his capacity “to produce miracles”⁷³ and the painting is the result for both the artist and the observer. Such as he says “Pictures must be miraculous: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need”⁷⁴.

After all the changes regarding the institution and the religion to which the chapel was affiliated with, on 27 February 1971 the Rothko chapel was dedicated as “a sacred place open to all, every day”⁷⁵. These alterations seem to have not brought any problem or adaptation for Rothko’s murals regarding their narration or religion. Based on this attitude and decision it is possible to interpret that the painter didn’t try to transmit or be linked to any specific religion but, that didn’t prevent him of using some influences taken from other religions to create his intense state of religiousness.



27.



28.

Madonna and Child (details), Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello, Italy, 1190 (fig.27)
 The Last Judgement (details), Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello, Italy, 1190 (fig.28)



29.





30.





31.



32.

Large captures of different perspectives of the interior space of the chapel (fig.31 and fig.32)

IV.

Conclusion

On my understanding, a creative process is often a confrontation established by the artist between the solitary act and interior construction of work against a search of sharing his emotions and how the public will appropriate and interpret them. As a Design student, creator and spectator of art, I always tried to think and give a particular attention to this issue, aiming to trace the most relevant dimensions, in order to create a coherent equilibrium on this process. To what extent does the artist intersect the message that he intends to transmit and what is the influence of the observer's judgment on the artist's creative process? The relationship of the object with its surroundings (artwork/space) is, in my perception, one of the most essential dimensions that can establish this balance between artist and spectator.

This essay aims to propose, through Rothko's ideas, ways to approach the interaction between the artwork and the space, as already mentioned, for Rothko considered that a "painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience"⁷⁶. I consider that the creative act and the artwork itself are only full when developed as a whole, in which the object interacts with the space and elements around it, while integrating them and always trying to consider the atmosphere, light, sound, and all the elements that can contribute to its interpretation. When taking this idea further ahead, the object of art can be described as a medium to take us to sensorial experiences and atmospheres into which the artist wants to lead us. The historical facts of the chapel commission are gathered in order to clarify the divergences and unexpected situations that may have changed the course of this project several times. It is important to highlight the fact that, despite these transformations, the commissioners, Dominique and John de Menil, never gave up the realization of the project, having replaced

the institution, piece of land and architects several times on the project. It is then natural to question the birth, idea and concept that conducted so many people into such a comprehensive project. Further on, this study suggests a way of interpreting the space, not being contradictory to other approaches.

In the chapel project, Rothko assumes to merge the two notions of space and artwork, while working on them in a systematic and almost obsessive way. Along this research, a dissection and anatomy of a selection of these elements was made, in order to better organise the proposal to comprehend the chapel space and this interaction, permanently present. These elements are identified as: form, scale, colour, and light. Further on, under a different approach, the intrinsic narration and religion on the chapel are depicted.

As a designer, the Rothko's creative process truly interests me: The Chapel project functioned as a starting point, that leads to some general conclusions, regarding the interaction between space and artwork. Mark Rothko's process is developed as a whole: the space and the object aim to be appropriated and to grow in accordance to each other, while having a collective involvement, in order to bring the intended experience to the space atmosphere and the observer. I find that it is necessary that the artist's intervention doesn't remain only on the production of the object and that the artist is able to interfere with the necessary vision of all the elements around, when needed for the better observation of the artwork.

To conclude, I consider important to highlight the irony present on the course of this process, such as the importance that the artist gave to this project: he worked for so long and put so much time and effort on it. Yet, he ended up by never visiting the site where the chapel would be built: It is partially contradictory and incoherent to create an installation where the climate alterations are of such importance and around which many aspects of the chapel depend on, and that the artist never considered. Mark Rothko committed suicide one year before the conclusion of the chapel, leaving the mission of installation, his masterpiece, in the last, and probably, for some crucial decisions, the most important moment of the project.

While trying to make an overall analysis of this study, it is important to outline that the chapel space created an inviting atmosphere, in order to attain a religious sentiment. When interpreting the chapel project, one can consider that the painter didn't mean to transmit a religious intention, but instead, a religious mood.

While trying to contextualize Mark Rothko's work in accordance to the Art Sacré movement, initially mentioned, I feel it is crucial to highlight

that, in this project, it is outstanding that this created atmosphere intends to take the viewer to a different type of reality. Contrary to the *Art Sacré's* projects or most of other sacred places linked to a specific religion, the Rothko Chapel aims to get the observer into a state of religiousness. It provides the necessary tools to interact with the space into a specific atmosphere, but on the other hand, it does not connect to a specific religion, nor intends to transmit a God's message, as most sacred places do. Based on the Rothko's explanation regarding his paintings, one can apply the same definition to the chapel space "a painting doesn't need anybody to explain what it is about"⁷⁷. In my opinion, the painter had the same feeling towards the chapel: When immersed on this space, the viewer is invited to have a complete experience. More than just the artwork, this interaction between the space, the artwork and the experience of the viewer is created as a whole, as an integration state between them, not being identified independently, but, on the contrary, as a blended state, an experience and the artwork itself.

One can consider Rothko's regards towards this amalgamation state as an important approach to ponder when having any type of other artistic creation. As a designer, I believe that, after being so deeply involved in this intense study, my regard towards any creation of art will never be the same, expecting it to have become more refined and sensitive, having apprehended a vast range of aspects and relations that I wouldn't contemplate before this study.

Endnotes

I. The Chapel Commission

1. DAVIES, Penelope J.E. DENNY, Walter B., HOFRITCHTER, Frima Fox, JACOBS, Joseph, HELFENSTEIN, Josef, SCHIPSI, Laureen, Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil, Houston, The Menil Collection, 2010, p.21.
2. NODELMAN, Sheldon, The Rothko Chapel Painting: Origins, Structure, Meaning, Austin, University of Texas Press: Menil Collection, 1997, p.33.
3. BARNES, Susan J., The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith; Rothko Chapel, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1989, p. 31-35
4. Nodelman, 1997, p. 33, 45
5. As the Museum of Modern Art's founding architecture curator in the early 1930s, he helped establish modernism in the United States; the sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to his famous Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut.
6. Designed in partnership with the architect Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe
7. Nodelman, 1997, p. 39
8. Nodelman, 1997, p. 34-35
9. Barnes, 1989, p. 15
10. Barnes, 1989, p. 108
11. DE MENIL, Dominique, "The Rothko Chapel", Art Journal 30, n°3, Spring 1971, p. 249-251.
12. Nodelman, 1997, p. 45-77
13. Based on the argument that the Second Vatican Council had just stated an anti-triumphal attitude concerning the new catholic churches, which was the

contrary of Philip Johnson's initial idea towards an architectural monumentality. (Nodelman, 1997, p. 70)

14. Letter from Philip Johnson addressed to John de Menil, November 28, 1967, The Menil Collection Archives, Houston, (Nodelman, 1997, p. 72)

15. Having the project been planned in New York and now Johnson had to accommodate it to Texas light and space.

II. Artwork and Space

16. DAVIES, Penelope J.E. DENNY, Walter B., HOFRITCHTER, Frima Fox, JACOBS, Joseph, HELFENSTEIN, Josef, SCHIPSI, Laureen, Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil, Houston, The Menil Collection, 2010, p.164.
17. FRICKE, Christiane, HONNEF, Klaus, RUHRBERG, Karl, SCHNECKENBURGER, Manfred, Arte do Século XX, Colonia, Lisbon, Paris, Taschen, 1999, volume 1, 1999, p. 269-293.
18. Letter written by Mark Rothko to Whitechapel Gallery in 1961 explaining how to hang his paintings, see in annexes p.135-136.
19. Nodelman, 1997, p. 35-39
20. Such as John and Dominique de Menil, Barnett Newman, Barnstone and Aubry, and his assistants William Scharf, Roy Edwards and Ray Kelly.
21. ASHTON, Dore, New York Times, 31 October 1958,

- p. 26.
22. ASHTON, Dore, *Beyond the Arabesque: Rothko, A Reading of Modern Art*, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 1969, p.29.
 23. Such Barnes, 1989, Nodelman, 1997, among others
 24. Barnes, 1989, p. 53
 25. Later on, Meyer Schapiro (1904-1996) reminded him the early Eastern Orthodox churches were built in that form. Bearing in mind that, although he was a Jew, Rothko had leaved in Russia with his family until he was ten, this church shape was not unfamiliar to him.
 26. Nodelman, 1997, p.184
 27. An area with curved walls at the end of a building, usually at the east end of a church
 28. Ashton, 1958, p. 26.
 29. Ashton, 1969, p.27.
 30. Ashton, 1958, p. 26.
 31. Nodelman, 1997, p.181
 32. Nodelman, 1997, p.184
 33. Nodelman, p.193
 34. Rothko, 2006, p.126
 35. WEISS, Jeffrey (Ed.), *Mark Rothko, Paris, Paris Musées*, 1999, p.21
 36. A style of abstract paintings that emerged in New York during 1959 and 1960, inspired by the European Modernists and very similar to the Abstract Expressionist style. The Color Field is characterized by large areas of one single color spread on a screen, resulting on flat paintings, it has few gesture, brushstrokes and action, giving more emphasis to the overall consistency of form and process. Mark Rothko was often considered to be part of it.
 37. Weiss,1999, p.38.
 38. Anfam,1997, p.25.
 39. Mark Rothko writes about his artwork: "There must be a clear preoccupation with detail- intimations of mortality... 'Tragic art, romantic art, etc. deals with the knowledge of death' and 'The tragic notion of the image is Always present in my mind when I paint...' Rothko(c), 1955, p.125,127.
 40. Nodelman, 1997, p.74
 41. ROTHKO, Mark, LOPEZ-REMRO, Miguel (Ed.), *Writings on Art*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 37,40.
 42. Anfam, 1997, p.6.
 43. Nodelman, 1997, p.39
 44. Anfam, 1996, p.6
 45. Nodelman, 1997, p.76
 46. Rothko, 2006, p.73-76
 47. Nodelman, 1997, p.67
 48. Adolph Goettlieb (1903-1974) was an American abstract expressionist painter, sculptor and printmaker, close
 49. A lettre written by Mark Rothko and Adolph Goettlieb to The New York Times art critic Edward Alden Jewell, in response to an unsatisfied article the art critic wrote about Rothko and Goettlieb's work. This letter explains in a very explicit way the message and point the two artists have regarding their art.
 50. Rothko, 2006, p. 35-56
 51. Rothko, 2006, p. 58-59
 52. Rothko, 2006, p. 65
 53. Rothko, 2006, p. 125-128
 54. Davies, 2010, p.146
 55. Nodelman, 1997, p. 306-324
 56. Nodelman, 1997, p.306
 57. CHAVE, Anna C., *Mark Rothko: Subjects in abstraction*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1989, p. 172.
 58. STOKER, Wessel, "The Rothko Chapel Paintings and the 'Urgency of the Transcendent Experience'", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Octobre 2008, Vol. 64, n° 2, p. 101
 59. Anfam, 1996, p.7, Nodelman, 1997, p.336, Stoker, 2008, p.100, among others
 60. Quoted by Mark Rothko in Chave, 1989, p.172
 61. NOVAK, Barbara, O'DOHERTY, Brian in "Les peintures sombres de Rothko: le tragique et le néant", *Mark Rothko, Paris, Paris Musées*, 1999,p.40
 62. Barnes, 1989, p.67
 63. Such as Anfam, Barnes, Nodelman, Stoker, among others
 64. Chave, 1989, p.180
 65. GAGE, John in "Rothko: La Couleur comme sujet", *Mark Rothko, Paris, Paris Musées*, 1999, p.29
 66. Novak, O'Doherty, 1999, p.30
 67. SELZ, Peter, *Mark Rothko, exhibition catalogue*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, (Jan. 18-Mar. 12, 1961), New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1961, p.14
 68. Among other artists working this way, the catholic Spanish painter Kiko Argüello (1939-) was responsible for the apse paintings of the murals present on the

Catedral de la Almudena in Madrid in 2004

69. Rothko, 2006, p.47

70. In the catalogue of the exhibition 15 Americans, 1952, p.18 (Barnes, 1989, p.22)

71. RODMAN, Seldon, Conversations with Artists, New York, Devin-Adair Co., 1957, p.93-94.

72. Rodman, 1957, pp. 93-94

73. Stoker, 2008, p.98

74. Rothko, 2006, p.59

75. Barnes, 1989, pg. 15

76. SEIBERLING, Dorothy, Mark Rothko, "Abstract Expressionism, Part II", LIFE Magazine, 16 November 1959, p. 82

77. FISCHER, John, "Mark Rothko. Portrait of the Artist as an Angry Man", Hapers Magazine, July 1970, p. 20

Annexes

Mark Rothko et Adolph Gottlieb¹, première page
tapée à la machine d'une lettre à Edward Alden
Jewell, critique d'art du *New York Times*.

M. Edward Alden Jewell
Le 7 juin 1943
Critique d'art, *New York Times*
229 West 43 street
New York, N.Y.

Cher Monsieur Jewell,

Pour l'artiste, la marche de l'esprit d'un critique est l'un des mystères de l'existence. C'est la raison pour laquelle, supposons-nous, la complainte de l'artiste qui est mécompris, notamment par le critique, est devenue un bruyant lieu commun. C'est donc un événement lorsque le vers tourne et que le critique du *Times* confesse tranquillement mais publiquement son « hébétément », « confondu » devant nos tableaux au Federation Show. Nous saluons cette honnête,

1. Barnett Newman collabora également à l'écriture de cette lettre. Pour le remercier de son aide, Rothko et Gottlieb lui offrirent les deux peintures qui y sont mentionnées et qui faisaient l'objet des critiques du journaliste dédicataire de la lettre (cf. D. Waldman, *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970. A Retrospective*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1978, p. 269). Dans un entretien de 1953 avec William Seitz, Rothko reconnaitra que ni lui ni Gottlieb n'écrivirent cette lettre, mais qu'il fut entièrement d'accord avec son contenu (voir p. 141 de ce volume). Ce témoignage souligne l'importance des brouillons, plus fidèles à la pensée de Rothko, bien que le texte de la lettre publiée soit une pièce centrale de la quasi-totalité des études sur Rothko. Cf. B. Clearwater, « Shared myths : reconsiderations of Rothko's and Gottlieb's letter to the *New York Times* », *Archives of American Art*, 24, n° 1, 1984, p. 23.

cordiale pourrions-nous dire, réaction devant nos « obscurs » tableaux, puisqu'en d'autres cercles critiques il semble que nous ayons créé un tintamarre hystérique. Et nous apprécions la gracieuse opportunité qui nous est offerte de présenter nos opinions.

Nous n'avons pas l'intention de défendre nos tableaux. Ils se défendent par eux-mêmes. Nous les considérons comme des déclarations claires. Votre échec à les écarter ou à les dénigrer est une preuve de première main qu'ils contiennent un peu de force communicative.

Nous refusons de les défendre, mais certes pas parce que nous ne le pouvons pas. Il est facile d'expliquer à un étourdi que *The Rape of Persephone* est une expression poétique de l'essence du mythe, la représentation du concept de semence et de son sol avec toutes ses implications brutales, l'impact d'une vérité élémentaire. Voudriez-vous que nous présentions ce concept abstrait avec tous ses sentiments compliqués au moyen d'un garçon et d'une fille qui trébuchent légèrement ?

Il est tout aussi facile d'expliquer *The Syrian Bull* comme une nouvelle interprétation d'une image archaïque impliquant des distorsions sans précédent. Comme l'art est intemporel, l'interprétation significative d'un symbole, quand bien même archaïque, a tout autant de justesse aujourd'hui que le symbole archaïque n'en avait jadis. Ou bien dirait-on que celui vieux de trois mille ans est plus exact ?

Or, ces faciles commentaires de programme ne peuvent aider que le simple d'esprit. Aucun jeu de commentaire possible ne peut expliquer nos peintures. Leur explication doit provenir d'une expérience consommée entre la peinture et celui qui la regarde.

L'appréciation de l'art est un mariage authentique des esprits. Et en art, comme dans le mariage, l'absence de consommation est un motif d'annulation.

La question, nous semble-t-il, n'est pas celle d'une « explication » des peintures mais de savoir si les idées essentielles que véhiculent ces peintures ont une signification.

Nous avons le sentiment que nos peintures font la preuve de nos convictions esthétiques dont voici, par conséquent, quelques-unes :

1. Pour nous, l'art est une aventure dans un monde inconnu, que seuls ceux qui veulent prendre des risques peuvent explorer.
2. Ce monde de l'imagination est libéré et violemment opposé au sens commun.
3. Nous sommes partisans d'une expression simple de la pensée complexe. Nous sommes pour la grande forme parce qu'elle a la force de ce qui est sans équivoque. Nous souhaitons réaffirmer la peinture plane. Nous sommes pour les formes plates parce qu'elles détruisent l'illusion et révèlent la vérité.
4. On accepte largement parmi les peintres l'idée que ce que l'on peint n'importe pas pourvu que cela soit bien peint. Ceci est l'essence de l'académisme. Il n'existe rien de tel qu'une bonne peinture à propos de rien. Nous affirmons que le sujet est crucial et que le seul contenu juste est celui qui est tragique et intemporel. C'est pourquoi nous déclarons une parenté spirituelle avec l'art archaïque.

Par conséquent, si notre travail incarne ces convictions-là, il doit offenser quiconque s'accorde spirituellement à la décoration d'intérieur, aux tableaux

MARK ROTHKO

pour la maison, aux tableaux pour le dessus de cheminée, aux peintures de genre américaines, aux peintures sociales, à la pureté en art : ceux qui font bouillir la marmite en remportant des prix, la National Academy, la Whitney Academy, la Corn Belt¹ Academy, les marmonniers, toute cette foutaise, etc.

Sincèrement vôtre,

Adolph Gottlieb
Marcus Rothko
130 Estate street
Brooklyn, New York.

1. L'expression courante *Corn Belt* désigne la zone céréalière du centre des États-Unis (N.d.T.).

ROTHKO, Mark, LOPEZ-REMERO, Miguel (Ed.), *Ecrits sur l'Art*, (Trad. Claude Bondy), Paris, Flammarion, 2009, p.73 -76

Déclaration personnelle, « Comment combiner l'architecture, la peinture et la sculpture », dans le magazine *Interiors*, 10 mai 1951.

J'aimerais dire quelque chose à propos des grands tableaux, et aborder peut-être certains des points établis par les personnes qui sont en quête d'une base spirituelle pour communier.

Je peins de très grands tableaux ; j'ai conscience que, historiquement, la fonction de peindre de grands tableaux est grandiloquente et pompeuse. La raison pour laquelle je les peins cependant – je pense que cela s'applique aussi à d'autres peintres que je connais –, c'est précisément parce que je veux être intime et humain. Peindre un petit tableau, c'est se placer soi-même hors de sa propre expérience, c'est considérer une expérience à travers un stéréopticon¹, ou au moyen d'un verre réducteur. Quelle que soit la manière dont on peint un plus grand tableau, on est dedans. Ce n'est pas quelque chose qu'on décide.

1. Instrument optique qui décompose ou combine des images projetées sur un écran [N.d.T.].

ROTHKO, Mark, LOPEZ-REMRO, Miguel (Ed.), *Ecrits sur l'Art*, (Trad. Claude Bondy), Paris, Flammarion, 2009, p. 126

Lettre à la Whitechapel Gallery (suggestions pour l'accrochage des tableaux), octobre-novembre 1961.

COULEUR DES MURS : les murs doivent être blanc cassé, avec de la terre de sicane et réchauffés par un peu de rouge. Si les murs sont trop blancs, ils rivalisent avec les tableaux qui tournent au vert à cause de la prédominance de rouge qui s'y trouve.

LUMIÈRE : la lumière, qu'elle soit naturelle ou artificielle, ne doit pas être trop forte : les tableaux ont leur propre lumière intérieure, et s'il y a trop de lumière, la couleur à l'intérieur du tableau déteint, et son apparence se déforme. L'idéal serait de les accrocher dans une salle normalement éclairée – ils ont été peints de cette façon. Ils ne doivent pas être surexposés à la lumière ou éclairés de façon rhétorique avec des spots, cela aurait pour effet d'altérer leur signification. Ils devraient soit être éclairés depuis assez loin, soit indirectement éclairés par des lumières placées dans le plafond ou dans le sol. Surtout, le tableau dans son entier doit être éclairé de façon égale, et pas trop de manière appuyée.

HAUTEUR DE L'ACCROCHAGE PAR RAPPORT AU SOL : les plus grands des tableaux doivent tous être accrochés aussi près du sol que possible, idéalement pas plus de 15 cm au-dessus du sol. Dans le cas des petites toiles, elles doivent être un peu élevées, mais pas « ciellées » (ne jamais accrocher en direction du plafond). Encore une fois, elles ont été peintes de cette façon. Si ces indications ne sont pas

suivies, les proportions des rectangles se déforment et les tableaux changent.

Les exceptions à ces règles concernent les tableaux cités ci-dessous, qui ont été peints comme des panneaux muraux pour être accrochés plus haut, en réalité. Ce sont :

1. *Sketch for Mural*, n° 1, 1958
2. *Mural Sections*, 2, 3, 4, 5, et 7, 1958-1959
3. *White and Black on Wine*, 1958

Les panneaux muraux ont été peints à une hauteur 3 mètres au-dessus du sol. S'il n'est pas possible de les surélever autant, n'importe quelle hauteur au-dessus de 1 mètre contribuerait à mettre en valeur leur avantage et leur effet.

GROUPEMENT : dans l'exposition du Museum of Modern Art, tous les anciens travaux jusqu'à 1949 inclus ont été accrochés comme un tout, les aquarelles séparées du reste. Les panneaux muraux formaient une deuxième unité, tous ensemble. La seule exception à ce regroupement des panneaux concerne le tableau qui appartient à M. Rubin, *White and Black on Wine*, 1958, qui pourrait trouver sa place, mais en étant accroché au-dessus des autres travaux puisqu'il s'agit d'une pièce de transition entre les peintures plus anciennes de cette année et les séries murales. Dans les travaux restants, le mieux est de ne pas suivre l'ordre chronologique mais de les classer selon le meilleur effet qu'ils peuvent produire les uns sur les autres. Par exemple, dans l'exposition du musée, les tableaux les plus clairs étaient présentés ensemble — jaunes, orange, etc. —, ce qui contribua grandement à l'effet produit.

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Image 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28.

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Image 3, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 24, 29, 30.

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Image 25

[online August 2016] <http://operatattler.typepad.com/.a/6a00d834b4c13053ef014e5f7ffe5a970c-popup>

Image 26

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Image 31

[online September 2016] http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/en_au/blog/the-rothko-chapel

Image 32

Image taken by G. E. Kidder Smith [online July 2016] https://dome.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.3/32628/117745_sv.jpg?sequence=2

