Interview between Neil Anderson and Roger Rothman (Summer, 2005)

Roger Rothman: To begin, how does this series of work relate to the last series you showed at Bridgette Meyer?

Neil Anderson: *The Elements* is a move away from the irregular forms of the last show at Bridgette Mayer toward a more architectural structure. The material I photographed to begin the work was chosen for the linear geometry the shapes suggested. In addition I have added photographic fragments from popular culture that reflect similar formal arrangements. As these fragmentary images are layered, new ones are added while others disappear. In this way, figure-ground relationships are established. Studying the meeting of forms in Mondrian's paintings was the origin for the construction of my own work. In the case of Mondrian, the broader black lines of his beginning drawing are gradually refined by the way he paints the white up to the black edge thereby defining both the black bars and the white or colored areas.

In the painting, *Fire*, for example, the final shapes were there early on, but remained obscured until the end. The point is that image was not imposed from some outside source but emerged in the process of daily work on the painting. It seems to me that this idea of placing emphasis on the process can be traced to the Abstract Expressionists.

RR: Nature has been an important influence in much of your work, not only in this series of paintings, but in others. How do you consider this influence, in light of our contemporary technophilia?

NA: Nature is a fact in my life, it surrounds my studio, it's what I see out the window, so it's not surprising that it would appear as a source in my work. However, I would say, the history of painting would be the important influence and "nature" is simply the occasion. The emphasis on craftsmanship in painting would appear to be a reaction to technology. The handmade quality of painting would appear anachronistic in our culture, however I remain convinced that the phenomenological experience it fosters is for me compelling. Whatever painting has to say will finally be indistinguishable from the practice of that craft. The simple, unmediated quality of painting can be seen as an antidote to the electronic world of technology. The stillness of painting seems out of touch with current culture yet its direct appeal to the senses, its phenomenological qualities, make it for me continually compelling.

RR: Can you talk some more about your relation to painters like Mondrian and the Abstract Expressionists? I'm particularly interested in your thoughts about your commitment to abstraction. What does it mean to you to hold to a set of modernist, perhaps even strictly Greenbergian, values and practices at a moment where such values and practices are considered by many to be outmoded by those of postmodernism?

NA: I believe I can be called an unrepentant modernist. In architecture, for example, I believe the best of "Postmodernism" is built on modernist notions of formal refinement and minimalist esthetics. I find inspiration in Frank Stella's *Black Paintings*, Brice Marden's working approach in the *Grove Series* and the exploration of paint as paint in Terry Winters. I don't particularly see these artists as representing "Greenbergian values" His historical materialism has mostly to do with his intellectual background in Marxism .I don't think working painters share such a deterministic view of history. I am reminded of Barnett Newman's analogy between artists and birds, and art historians and ornithologists. For artists the enterprise of painting is more physical than interpretive

RR: Yet I find a number of significant differences between your work and that of Stella, Marden and Winters—as well as with the that of the major figures of Abstraction Expressionism. The more I consider your work, the more I'm drawn to what I would call its "mannerist" or "rococo" aspects. There is a refined delicacy of touch that I don't find at all in fifties Abstract Expressionism, and that seems to me entirely different from the type of mark-making found in Stella, Winters and Marden.

NA: My connection to the Abstract Expressionists involves the notion of improvisation, that definition of painting which says meaning is found in the process, that all parts of the surface are equally interdependent and that any spatial illusion is limited to the actual layers of paint. They were very conscious of removing anything recognizable so nothing would distract from the action of the paint itself as it moved across the surface. "Delicacy of touch" in my work can be assigned to my idiosyncratic obsession with formal refinement, that obsession which finally concludes the improvisation. Your definition of "mannerism" as refining an accepted definition of painting, in this case abstraction, could be illuminating when applied to my work. In fact most of the abstract painters I know could be said to be working in the "manner" of the great breakthroughs of Abstract Expressionism.

RR: You describe your work with terms like "improvisation," "process," "discovery," "suggestion." I wonder if there is an ethical, component to your interest in these elements, or if the concern is purely aesthetic. And if it is purely aesthetic, I wonder if you consider this withdrawal from the political as itself an implicit political statement?

NA: I set up formal circumstances; certain kinds of structures, color groups and ways of applying paint which determine the direction in which the work will unfold. Formal ideas are included and excluded along the way. As little as possible is predetermined; there is always room to be surprised by the unexpected. I work with the conviction that merely executing the process will ultimately bear fruit. You could assume then that I believe in the integrity of this process as an end in itself, separate from other ways of thinking. My position is not so much a withdrawal from the political as an assertion of its irrelevance to the craft of painting. If you wish, that in itself is a political assertion about preserving the integrity of painting. See Ad Reinhart.