

The last monument was a sand box or a model desert. Under the dead light of the Passaic afternoon the desert became a map of infinite disintegration and forgetfulness. This monument of minute particles blazed under a bleakly glowing sun, and suggested the sullen dissolution of entire continents, the drying up of oceans—no longer were there green forests and high mountains—all that existed were millions of grains of sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pulverized into dust.

—Robert Smithson
“A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey”

Israel Lund’s screen-printed paintings are often ostensibly prints of a blank space, made by pushing paint through an empty silk-screen. The paintings have sweeps and waves of color and complexity, scattered static in shades of cyan, magenta, yellow, black (CMYK) and white. At a certain remove (both in terms of physical distance as well as the kind of distance created by photography and online distribution) several other hues are discerned—greens, deep reds, purples and maroons. From far away, condensed areas of color coalesce here and become sparse there, registering as blazing hot light, or as shadowy forms. They most resemble a printed image that has been copied or enlarged too many times, and has lost its legibility. But these distanced ways of seeing—across large intervals of space and time, and with a dissociated gaze—are likely the way that we mostly look today. In Lund’s paintings this is a form of alternate register, if not a complete misregister, because when standing nose-close to them, they do not blend and bleed. Instead, the majority of paint spots remain granular. This is because after thousands of paint pinpoints have been pressed through silk, they arrive onto unprimed canvas. Having been squeezed through a fine matrix, and thereby sys-

tematized, they sit upright retaining their particle-like qualities, as though hesitant to be integrated into an image. Like the grains in the sandbox that Robert Smithson describes in his 1967 essay on Passaic, they might be read as post-industrial remains. A century of abstract painting ground into a fine dust, which, following the laws of entropy, cannot be pieced back together to create an image. As such, the paintings themselves often give the impression of a fine material clinging to an abandoned architecture, creeping with mold, spores, moss, chalk, and other flecks of debris.

Lund’s paintings describe a space as it is encountered by stochastic elements—the wind as it travels through a tunnel, the air as it heats in a baking loaf, or, to use Robert Smithson’s example above, the distribution of grains in a child’s sandbox. But each tunnel, loaf, or sandbox is specific, rather than general, as is each gust of wind, air bubble, or child. It’s true that Lund can select color, and can alter the pressure with which he pushes the paint through the screen, but the way the paint will appear on the other side is somewhat randomized. It’s important to remember, however, that there’s no such thing as a “blank” space or a “non-space” here. To take an example, several of Lund’s paintings are either based on or scaled to 8½ x 11-inch “letter size” paper, dimensions designated by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). In the rest of the world, this paper size (which is referred to as “American Letter” in Europe) is something of an irritating deviation, given that most other countries use the International Standards Organization (ISO) approved A4. “Letter” settings sometimes create jams and errors when one is installing printer and drivers, or using a US computer program.

I mention this to say that as well as registering in America as a non-decision and a standard unit, part of the appeal of such standardized models such as paper-scale is that they are both arbitrary and specific. In this case, according to the American Forest and Paper Association, 11 inches was the quarter length of the maximum reach of an experienced vatman who would dip large moulds into a water vat. These large sheets that encompassed the full extent of a worker’s reach would then be quartered into

four. As Marshall McLuhan reminds us, the “content of a medium is always another medium.”¹ So even while the technology of papermaking has changed, the scale of American men’s arms has remained.

Technically, Lund’s paintings carry such production histories with them, not least from the history of printmaking. What they also seem to describe, very distinctly, is noise rather than signal—though crucially, it is directed noise. At the onset of the contemporary digital age, the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler described in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* the process of transforming the majority of media into a digital format, a process that is sometimes experienced as a flattening of media. It’s worth turning to writers who have used information theory to discuss works of art, as a way to think through Lund’s paintings. “The general digitization of channels and information erases the difference between individual media,” wrote Kittler in 1986.² “Sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects, known to consumers as interface. Sense and the senses turn into eyewash.”³ While this write-off might leave little room for the ingenuity of digital image making, the phrase “eyewash” springs out, because in effect, the eyewash effect is precisely what Lund’s paintings resist or trouble when they stick in the “real” or the “meatspace” by acknowledging their transformed representation on online. Kittler remarked in the same text that “all data flows have to pass through the bottleneck of the signifier,”⁴ but Lund’s paintings seems to casually acknowledge that they will pass through several bottlenecks—the silkscreen, the painting, the camera and the jpg. Some encounters with the work will be experienced as eyewash, others as the snow crash of white noise.

Where trying to discern signal from noise, especially in code breaking, Kittler points out that encrypting systems are finite, whereas noise is infinite. What the noiselike qualities of Lund’s paintings, scatterings of buzz and drag, also powerfully resist is translatability, another historic signifying system that has classically been attached to painting. Classical painting, in Umberto Eco’s conception, especially where it was related to the

Church, was a symbolist, translatable form that sought to communicate a message. *The Open Work* (1962), Eco’s text celebrating the politics of artworks that are freeform, unfinished, and “open,” points to noise rather than suggests that the “richest form of communication —richest because most open—requires a delicate balance permitting the merest order within the maximum disorder. This balance marks the limit between the undifferentiated realm of utter potential and a field of possibilities.”

Lund’s paintings are not there to be decoded. There is not a key that will break them open, either in a press release or in a fact of making. They are more likely to be keyed into a context, and hung in a way that opens up the space around them, conferring openness rather than meaning. They feel like a misregistered or broken image, but there are no signs in the paintings other than ones intuited or felt by viewers (though those are real). Then again, “the sign of the sign is that it can be replaced. . . . all that is Real sticks in place,” and there is only the reality that the paintings create, which has been mostly carved from the realm of the infinite, rather than the realm of signals and signs.

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 8.
2. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (1986; repr., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 4.
5. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (1962; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 98.
6. Kittler, “Signal-to-Noise Ratio,” in *The Truth of the Technological World: Essays on the Genealogy of Presence*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 166.