

Can Pictures Think?

Jim Elkins

jameselkins@fastmail.fm

Revised Sunday, 29 March, 2009



Background

This material was first presented at the Academy of Art, Maastricht, April 2006, for the inauguration of Hanneke Grootenboer's postgraduate program on "The Pensive Image." (Then at the second Drawing Centre conference at the Tate Britain, with Alain Badiou -- Catherine de Zegher's conference.)

The problem here is to find the best way to conceptualize the feeling that paintings, drawings, and graphic marks in general, *think* — produce thought.

Drawing / painting



Much of what can be said about painting also pertains to drawing. Three senses in which “drawing” is oblique to “painting” in this thematic:

1. Some qualities associated with thought seem to proceed from an image's presence, as distinct from its marks
2. Drawn marks have been taken to be more articulated, and hence more associated with thought, or language
3. The apparently unmediated quality of self-awareness has been taken as an analogue of drawing's “immediacy”

Organization of this lecture

A slippery slope:

1 Pictures as objects structured like language (with 6 examples)

2 The voice of pictures

3 The living image

(Some places not quite on the slope) —

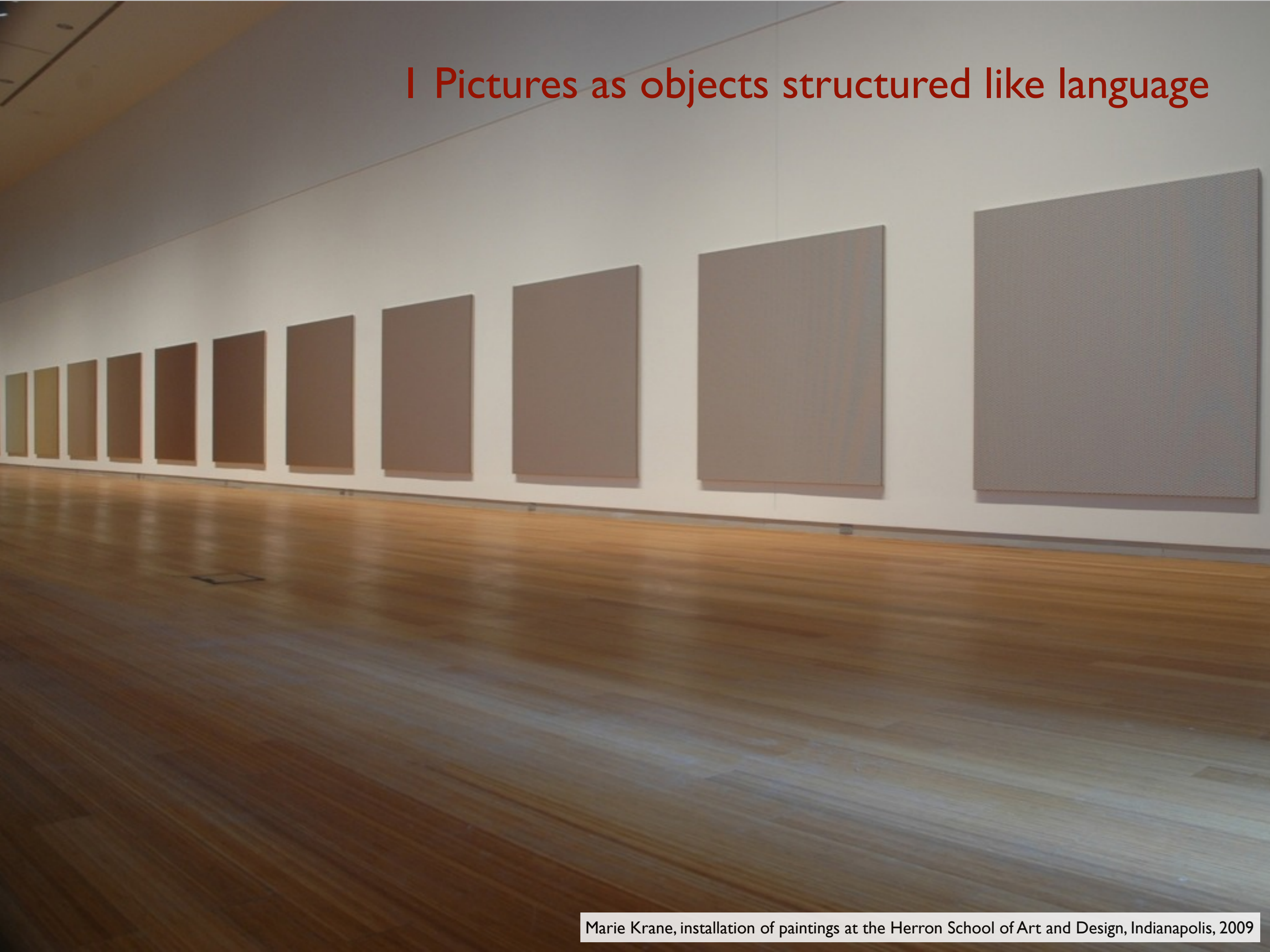
() The pensive image

() The image that philosophizes

(Notes)

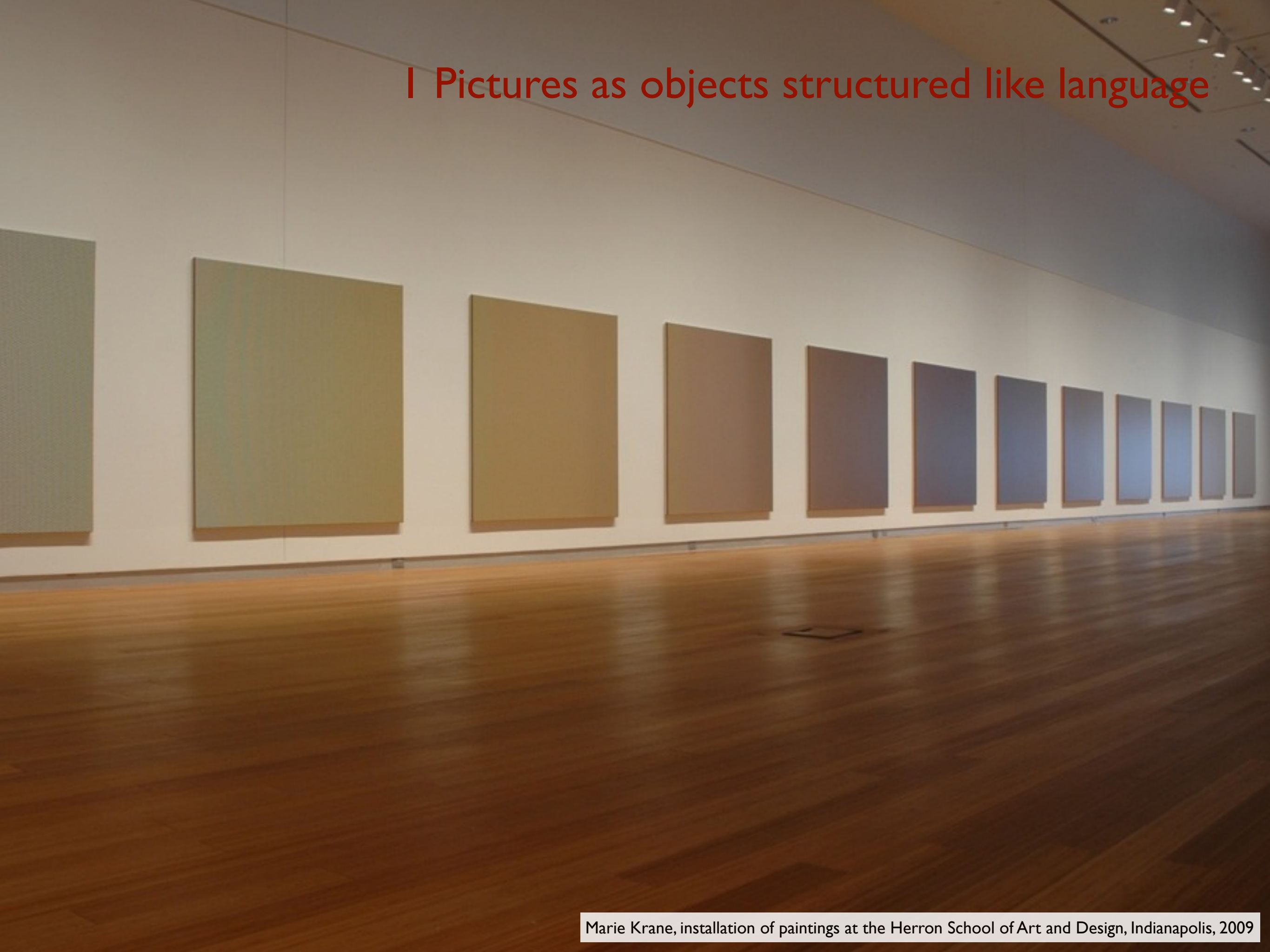
The slippery slope

I Pictures as objects structured like language



Marie Krane, installation of paintings at the Herron School of Art and Design, Indianapolis, 2009

I Pictures as objects structured like language

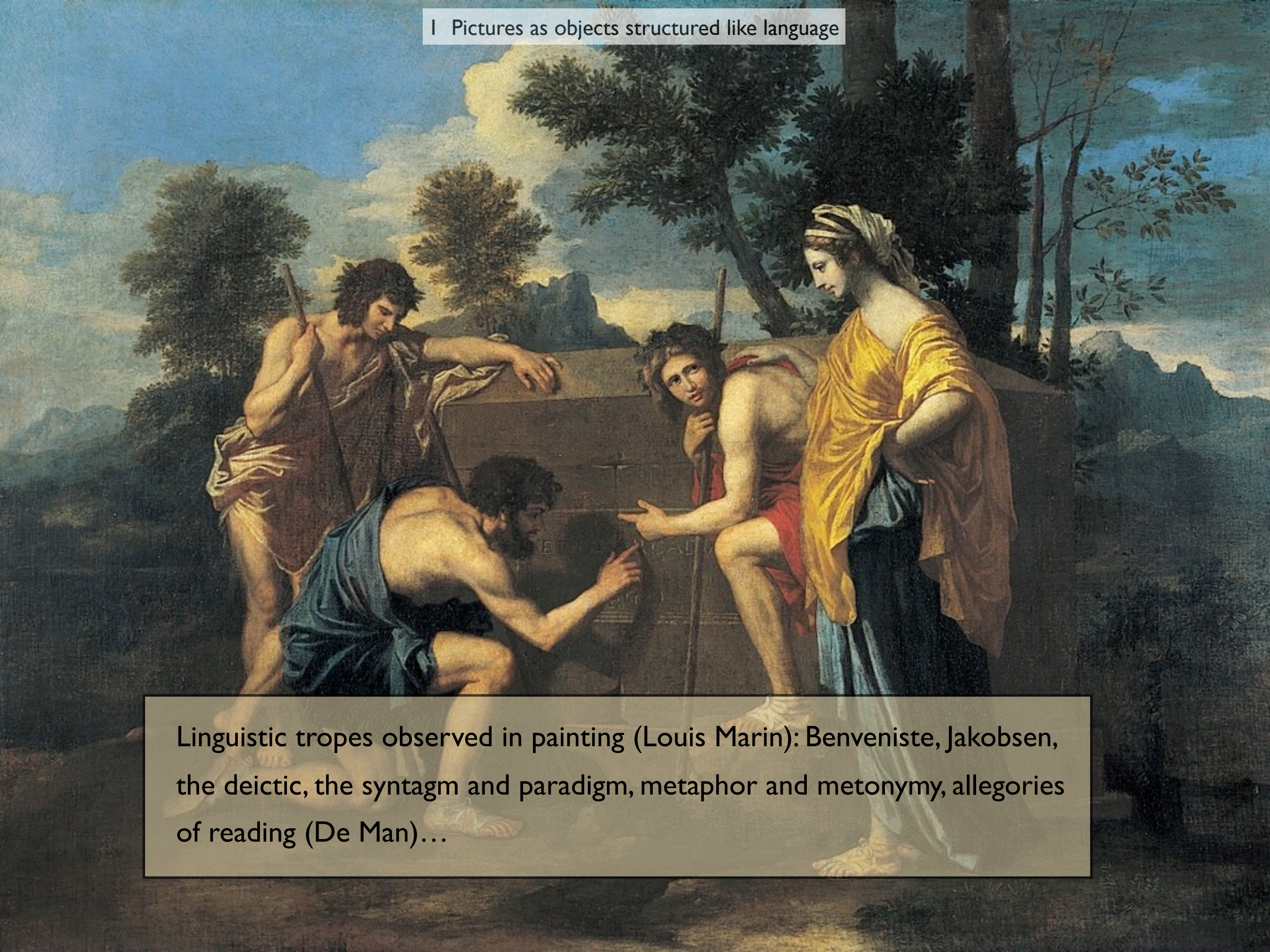


Marie Krane, installation of paintings at the Herron School of Art and Design, Indianapolis, 2009

This is from the beginning a very difficult topic;
each place on the slope can be thought of as the
product of an elision of two interpretations:

A first elision is between the awareness that an
object provokes thoughts, and sensing that the
object *embodies* thought (as writing, as signs)

This elision sets in motion an open-ended desire
to *read* pictures...

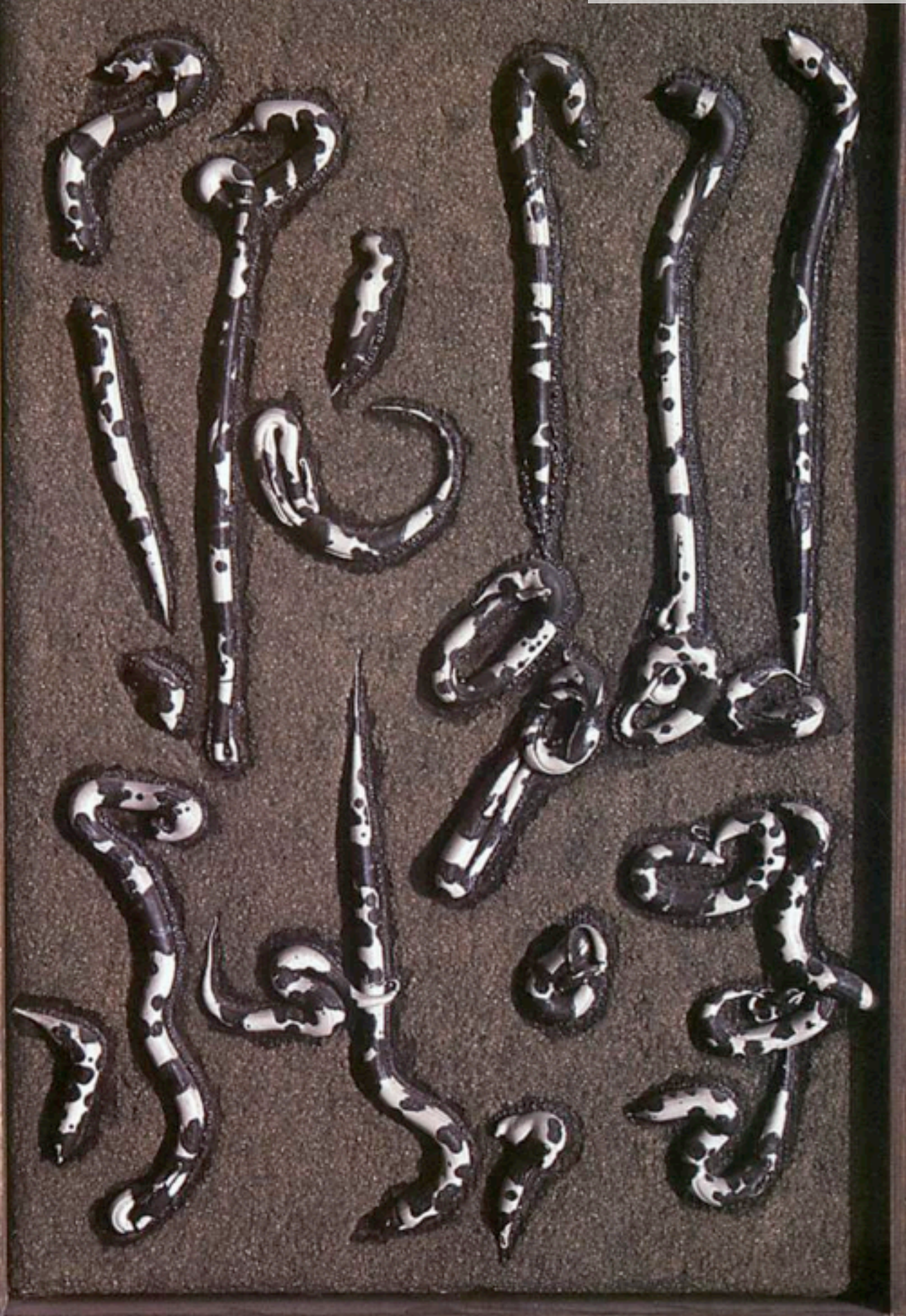


Linguistic tropes observed in painting (Louis Marin): Benveniste, Jakobsen, the deictic, the syntagm and paradigm, metaphor and metonymy, allegories of reading (De Man)...

Drawings that elicit the *feeling of reading*; pseudowriting, picture writing, *griffonage*, *gribrouiller*; Alexander Marshack, Neolithic marking, the Tai Plaque, and the notion of *possibly* reading (Whitney Davis)...

More explicit elements of writing: sign, syntax, orders and forms of reading (Walter Ong), register lines (Whitney Davis), oppositional signs (Saussure), discrete signs, nondense signs (Goodman)...

The semiotic and “subsemiotic” elements of visual “language”: morphemes, signs, marks, traces, *traits*, *orli*, *splendores*, *contorni* (more on these later)...



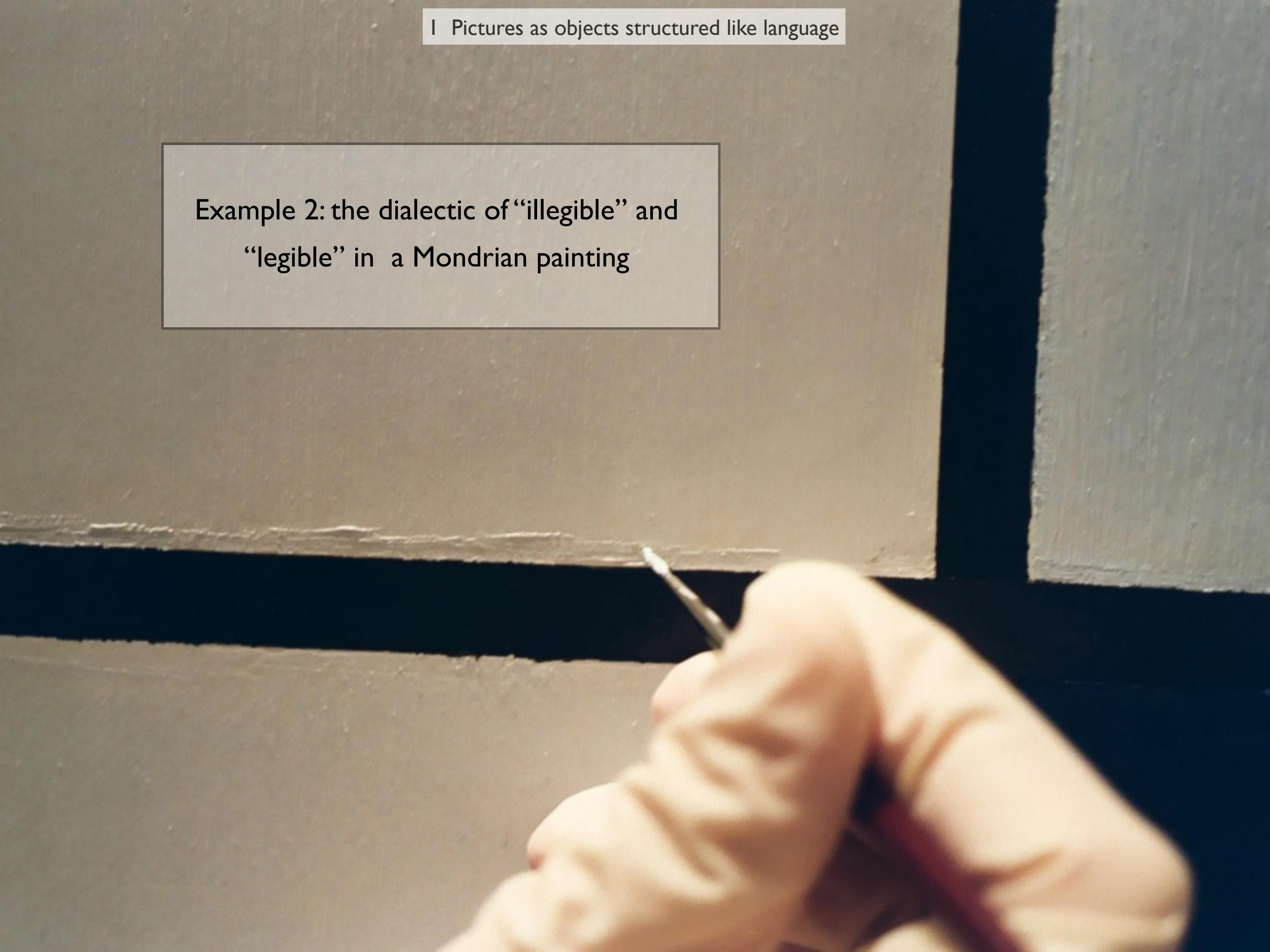
Writinglike forms elicit the feeling that the image may be legible, or is reminiscent of legibility

They express in part by setting up a dialectic with “illegible” marks, defining what might be susceptible to “reading”

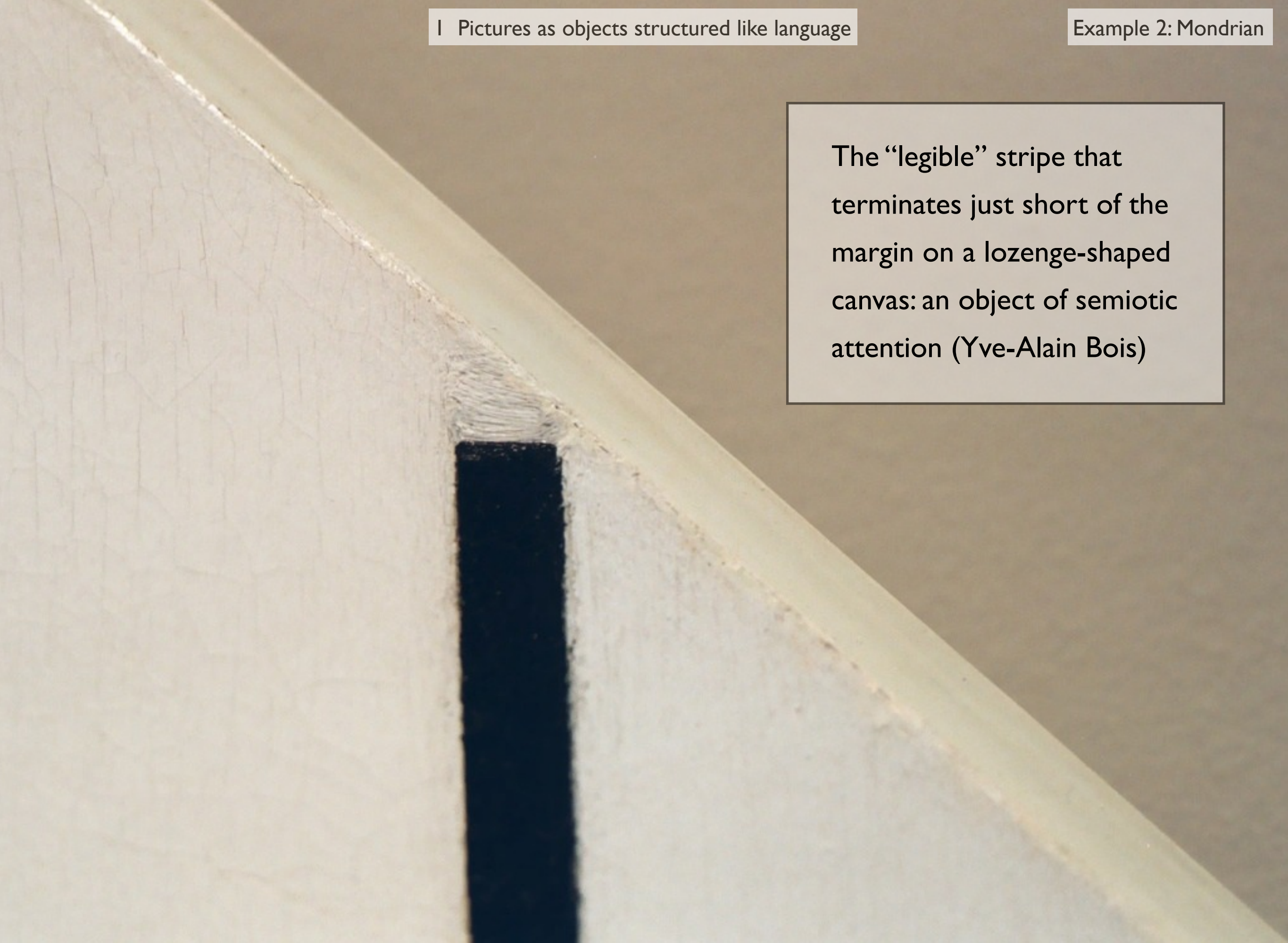
Six examples:

1. Albrecht Dürer prints
2. A Mondrian painting
3. Bernice Corcoran (Irish artist)
4. Jim Savage (Irish artist)
5. Michelangelo drawings
6. (A surprise)

Example 2: the dialectic of “illegible” and
“legible” in a Mondrian painting

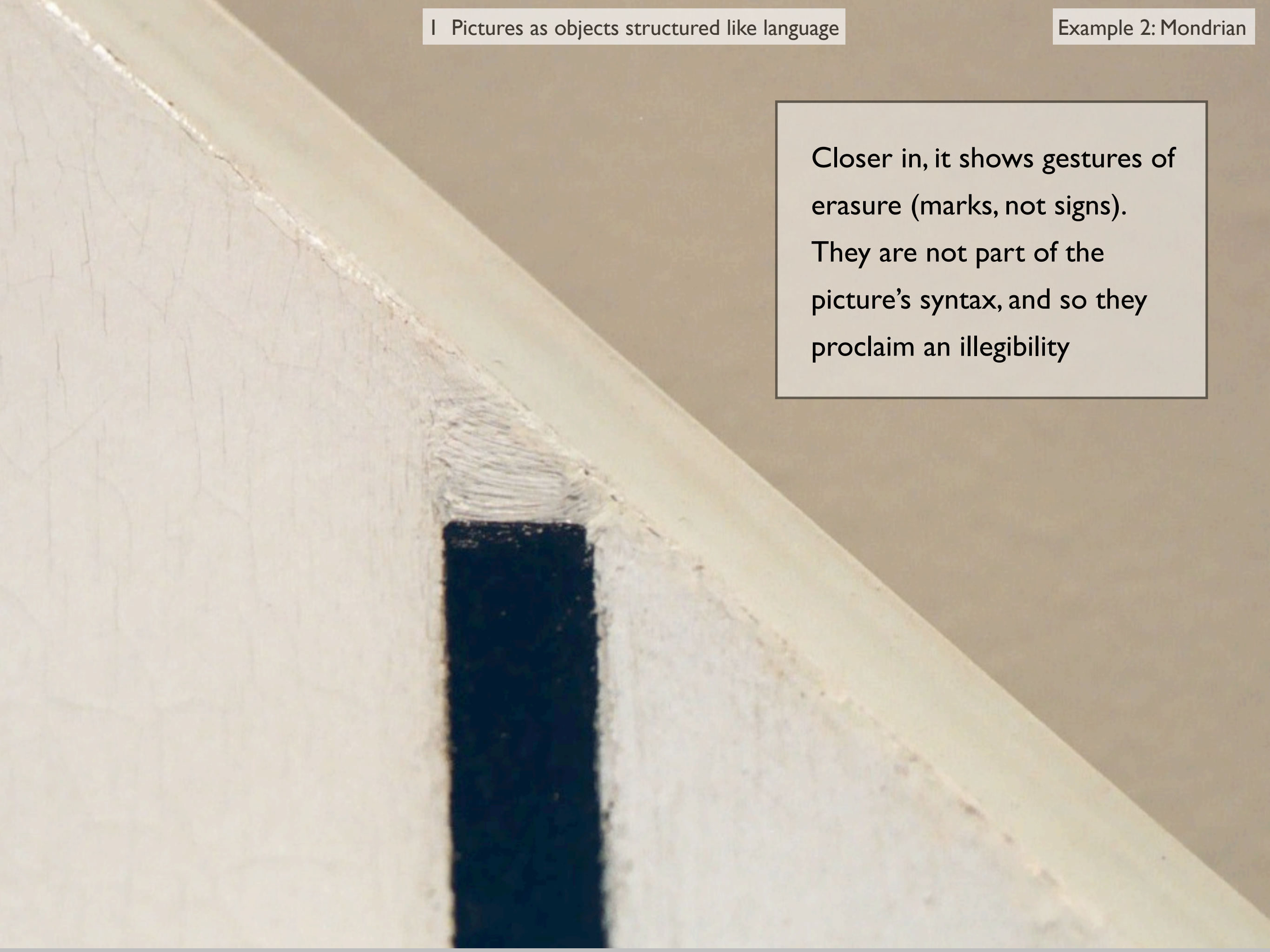


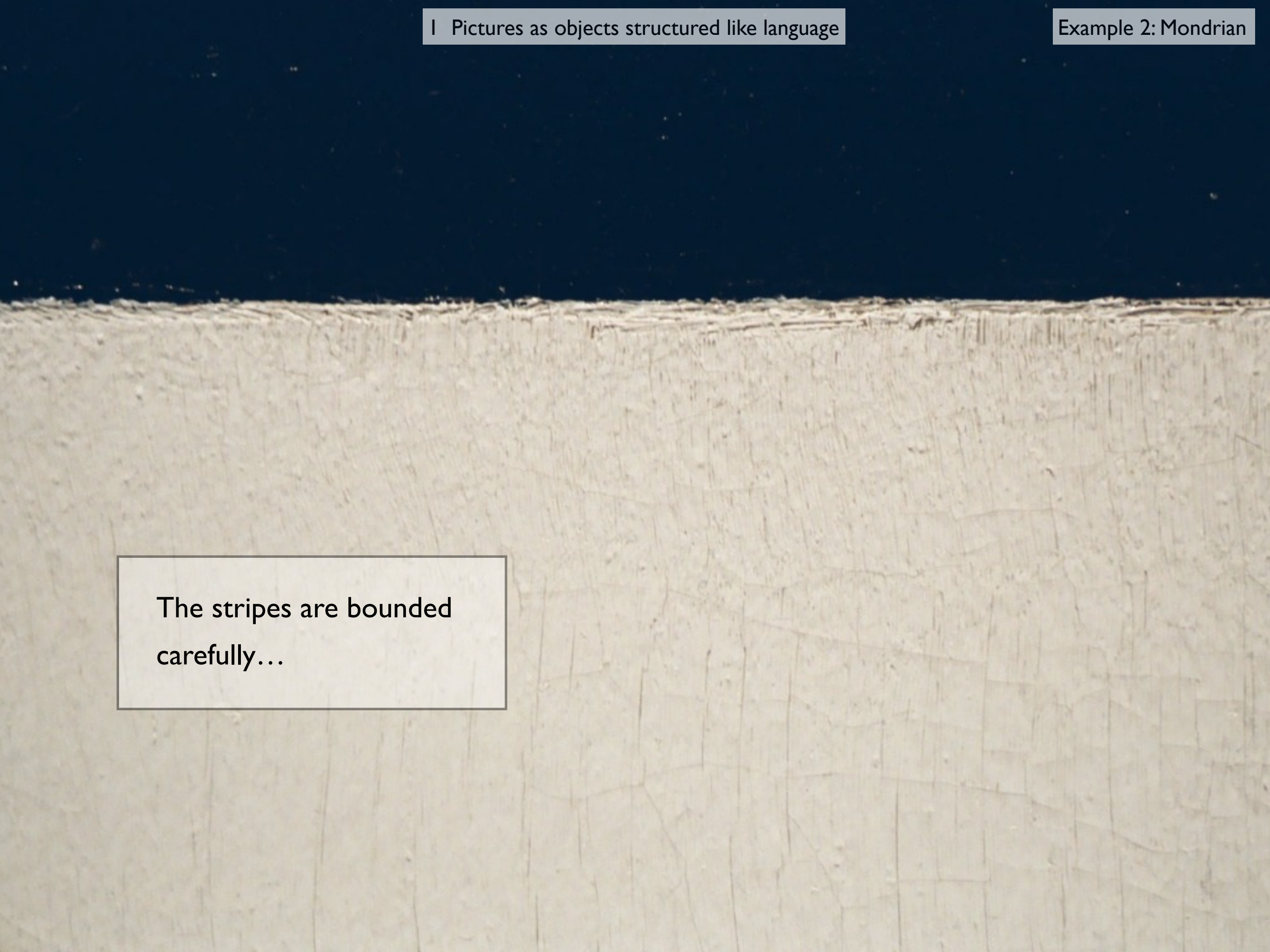
The “legible” stripe that terminates just short of the margin on a lozenge-shaped canvas: an object of semiotic attention (Yve-Alain Bois)




Closer in, it shows gestures of erasure (marks, not signs).

They are not part of the picture's syntax, and so they proclaim an illegibility

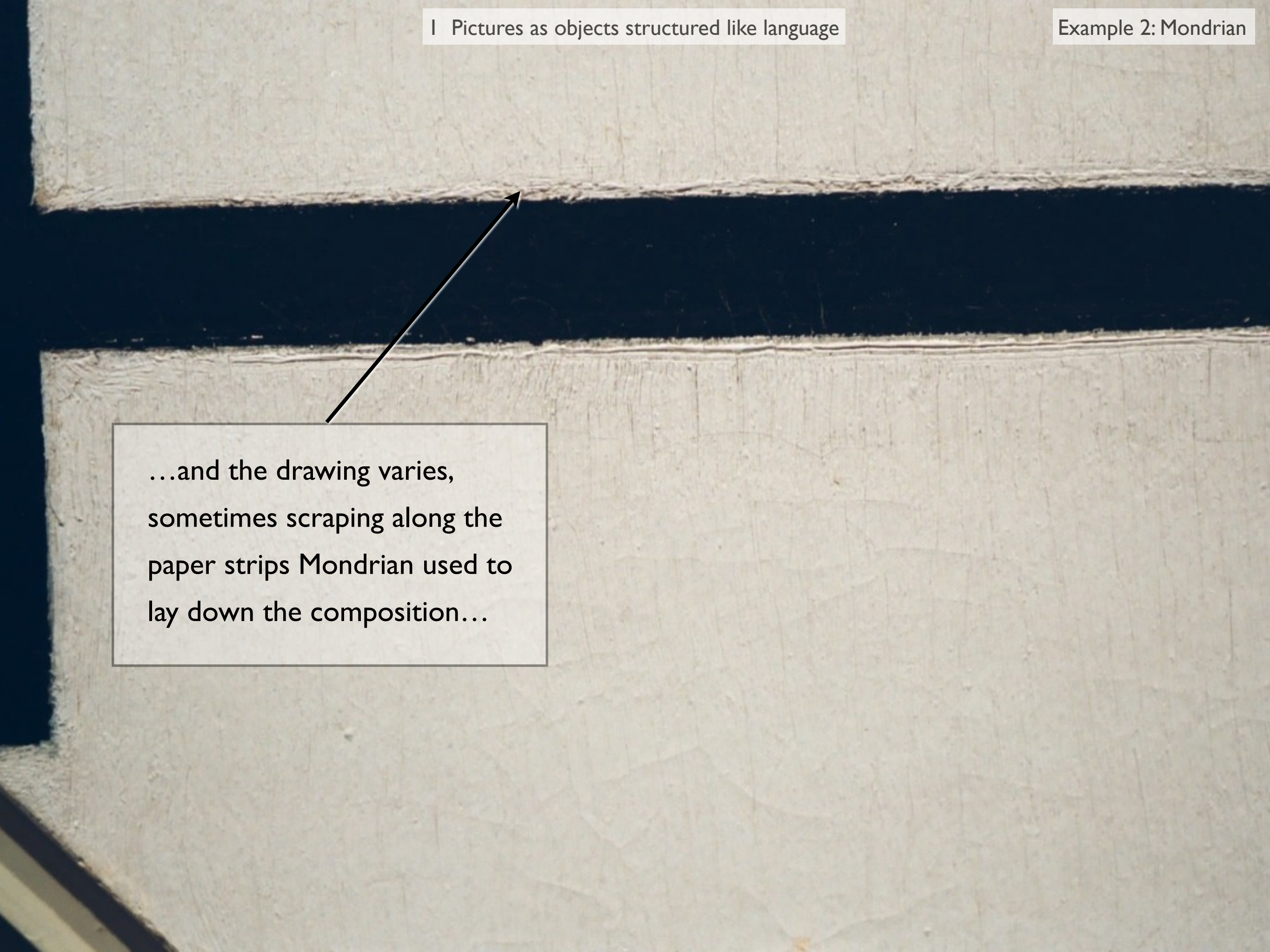




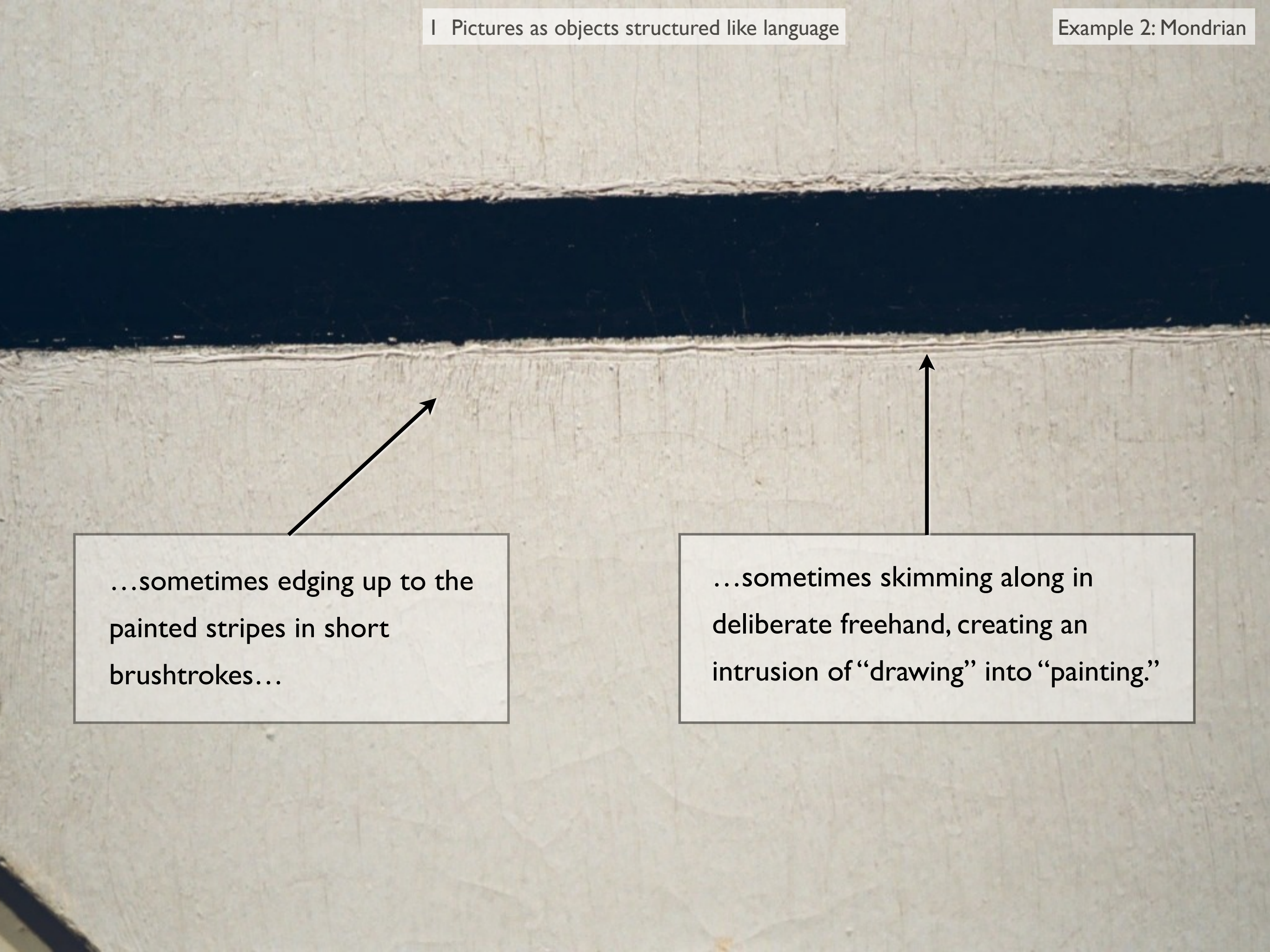
The stripes are bounded
carefully...



... that is, legibly, but from close up, they are “drawn”...



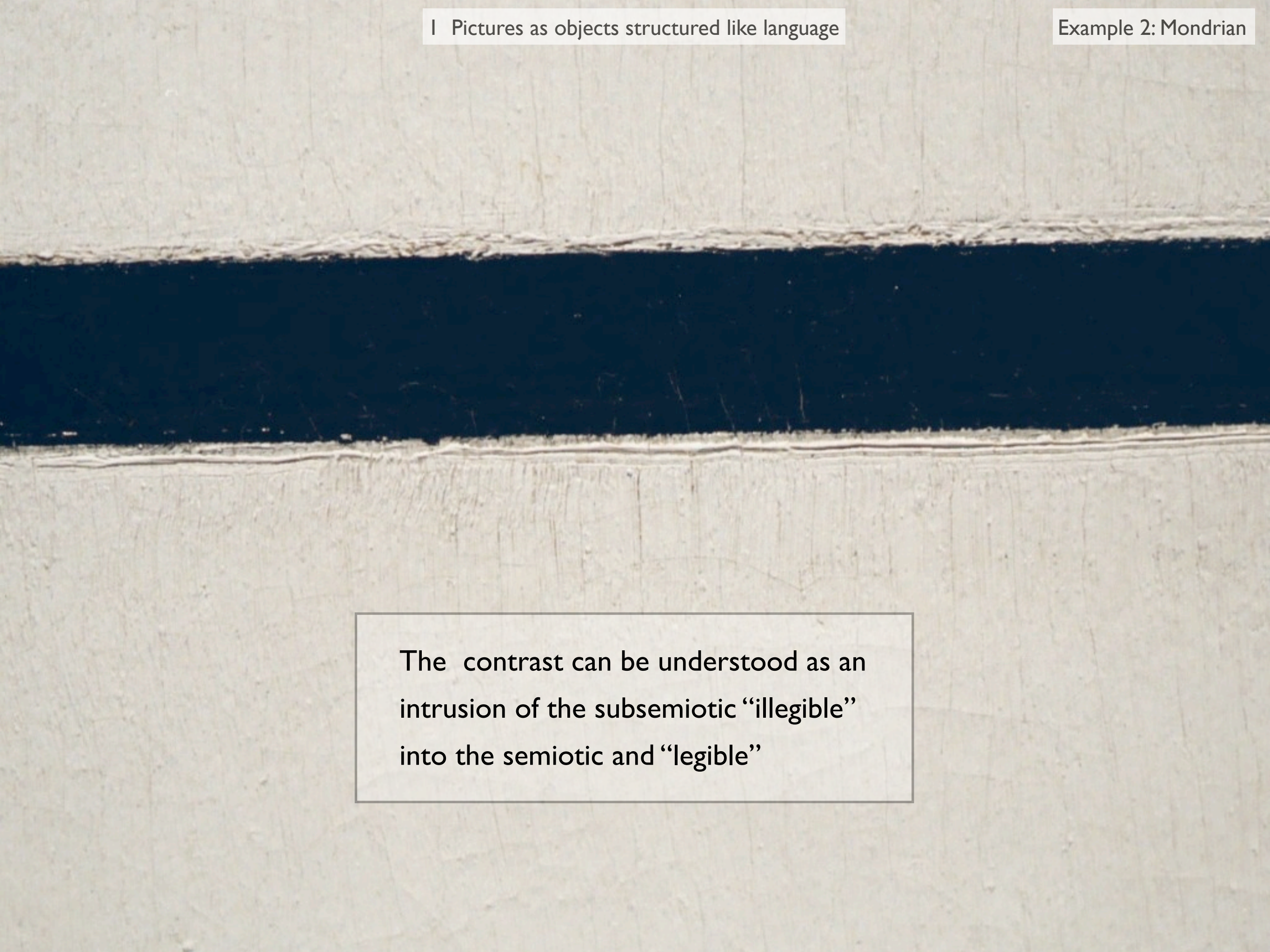
...and the drawing varies,
sometimes scraping along the
paper strips Mondrian used to
lay down the composition...



...sometimes edging up to the
painted stripes in short
brushstrokes...

This image is a close-up of a painting, likely by Piet Mondrian, showing a dark horizontal stripe. The background is a light, textured surface. Two arrows point from text boxes to the stripe. The left arrow points to the area where brushstrokes are edging up to the stripe. The right arrow points to the area where the stripe is being sketched with a freehand line.

...sometimes skimming along in
deliberate freehand, creating an
intrusion of “drawing” into “painting.”



The contrast can be understood as an intrusion of the subsemiotic “illegible” into the semiotic and “legible”