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The Spatial Installation of Painting

During the Renaissance, there was a fundamental change in the way painting was experienced. It involved the movement away from the architecturally confined surface of the mural to the framed canvas and the application of perspective thereupon. Paintings became windows through which one penetrated the wall and observed the experience within. The frame conveniently established the boundaries, maintaining a distance between subject and object. The spectator projected his abstracted self into the receding illusion without incurring a scratch.... Ideally safe .... always bodily outside .... identification and detachment working hand in hand. (1)

Illusionism, as such, was part of a growing attraction to the vicarious aspects of experience which gradually has pervaded Western culture. The struggle against this peep show tendency is the history of modernism, a project bent on delivering a sight which is not only seeing but feeling, of moving through and beyond the detachment of eyes into a bodily act of participation. That this participation springs from an encounter with an object freed to stand by itself and bear its own meaning without the illusions of locatable space and literary myth is the modernist heritage.... A heritage which began with the landscape painters of the 18th century.

They nibbled away at DaVinci’s receding illusion


2 O’Doherty, “Inside the White Cube, Part I,” Artforum, p. 27.
through the use of color and mist. The horizontal sweep of the horizon moved to the painting’s edges and beyond, calling into play the space around it, accenting its objecthood. With this lateral extension the deep space began to flatten itself into a real surface, but this time without subservience to the architectural context. (3)

Impressionism furthered the project by reacting to the new frontal surface, applying paint with a bold physicality.... Monet, with his casually dabbed atmospheric studies, Van Gogh, with his intense furrows of paint, and Seurat, with his dots extending over unto the frame, softening the edges, relaxing the barriers.... All of them pleading for our indulgence as physical planar objects. Cezanne refined the process, coordinating hand, medium and surface into a structural weave which revealed each of the aspects and their objective unification.

The Cubists followed, moving forward, in front of the canvas surface, divining the painting plane’s presence and its consequent need to grasp space and confront the onlooker, divorcing itself from the wall. They even went so far as to employ actual objects from the material world in their collage developments, relating directly with their spectator’s empirical experiences, real becoming abstract and abstract real. (4)

The implications were all right there, but strangely Modernism stalled in its tracks. The window of illusionism had indeed been shut but the need to project, to grasp and demand the viewer’s participation called into question the framed canvas’ ability to accomplish


There were various avant-garde offshoots, particularly Dada and later Pop, which showed no hesitancy in bestowing everyday objects with a kind of mystification, but it was apparently too soon for the mainstream of modernist painting. Besides, there was a bundle of money to be made on the repetitive embellishment of the convenient well-mannered unobtrusive canvas.... Mondrian with his academic simplicities, Matisse with that gentle mixture of the decorative and structural, and the abstract expressionists with their wild bewildering encounters scrawled into its surface.... all of which confirmed the demise of traditional perspective and the ascension of the literal objecthood of the painting plane itself.... ad infinitum.

Today, we have such names as Stella, Noland and Olitski grappling heroically with this same problem, their big expansive color field developments hung obediently on gallery walls, big walls awaiting big collectors, still allowing the spectator to stand off and play safe within the gallery scene, caught up in a routine of pampered elitism. Galleries have preempted these redundancies by taking on the air of religious sanctuaries in an effort to encourage the viewer to possess, to reify, to consume, the whole trip an affirmation of the established order. (5)

Painting as a modernist project, set on providing us with a fundamental sight has come full circle. In becoming itself, it is faced with the necessity of becoming something else, of finding a new format and a new space. Illusionism within the picture plane has been re-

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placed with the secure detachment setup and pampered by the vicarious staging of the viewing space itself. The Cubists alluded to this, sensing the dilemma of the framed canvas, seeking to move in front of its objecthood. Today, something must be done to break the catatonic convenience of the art scene.... Day-glo pigments, glitter, unusual materials, structures, environments, soft supports, however repulsive and chancy...before painting can function at all any more.

Accordingly, the Spatial Installation of Painting is involved with an investigation of materials which will provide a new format and utilize space other than, or in spite of, the exhibition gallery. Basic to its conception is the iconoclastic role that all art should embrace. It must provide a dialectic which can deal with this culture's seemingly innate ability to reify all experience rendering it meaningless. It is indeed ironic that modernist painting's struggle for self-sufficiency succeeds only when calling into question its self-sufficiency. Painting survives only where it cancels itself, where it saves its substance by denying its traditional form and thereby denying reconciliation. Such is our burden.... but nothing less is required.

Pablo Neruda, the great Chilean poet-statesman, sets the stage for this challenge in two stanzas from his poem, Things Breaking, translated by Ben Belitt.

Life grinds
On the glasses and powders, wearing us threadbare,
Smashing to smithereens,

*Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 64.*
POUNDING
THE FORMS;
WHATEVER IS LEFT OF ITS PASSING ABIDES
LIKE A SHIP OR A REEF IN THE OCEAN,
AND PERISHES THERE
IN THE CIRCLE OF BREAKABLE HAZARD
RINGED BY THE PITILESS MENACE OF WATERS.

LET US GATHER THEM, ONCE AND FOR ALL - THE CLOCKS
AND THE PLATTERS, CUPS CARVED IN COLD -
INTO A POKE WITH THEM ALL AND
DOWN TO THE SEA WITH OUR TREASURE!
THERE LET OUR FURNITURE SMASH
IN THE SINISTER SHOCK OF A BREAKER;
LET THE THINGS THAT ARE BROKEN
CALL OUT LIKE A RIVER
AND THE SEA RENDER BACK TO US WHOLE
IN THE MIGHT OF ITS CROSSCURRENTS
ALL THAT WE HELD OF NO WORTH,
THE TRUMPERY NO HAND HAS BROKEN
BUT STILL GOES ON BREAKING. (7)

NERUDA RETURNS ONE TO FUNDAMENTAL PROCESS, TO A
CANCELLING OUT OF ALL THAT MATERIAL CULTURE IS IN AN AT-
TEMPT AT REGENERATING IT SYMBOLICALLY. HIS IMAGERY IS
APPROPRIATE, FOR ONE COULD EASILY INCLUDE A PAINTING OR
TWO IN HIS POKE FOR THE SEA ... THEIR WORTH LOST, CONSUMED
AND USED AS AN AFFIRMATION OF THE ESTABLISHED ROUTINE,
IT IS BETTER TO GIVE IT UP TO THE PROCESS OF THE SEA, OR

At least, challenge its materiality with the fundamental facts of our precarious existence.

One is reminded of the Nazi book burnings and their attack on the established culture. The parallels are both frightening and intriguing.... That urge to destroy for the promise of a new world, a new vision. Such are the extremes with which the arts flirt. This technological world, immanentist through and through, accommodates us from a position of complete dominance .... A dominance so persuading that one is forever tempted to lash out waving the banners of revolution. The 60's bear witness to this fact, but also to a consequent cessation of creative output. (8) Neruda, a Chilean revolutionary, who suffered the traumas of political activity, returned to the land, elemental and healthy, as the real revolution, personal in scale, concerned with establishing a working dialectic. This is a long way from the collective assumptions of the National Socialists or other political movements. It is the starting point for the Spatial Installation of Painting.

The Spatial Installation of Painting is an accumulation of objects in space and a celebration of their interaction. Light as the source of all celebration is the key ground to their interaction. Each object is a painting plane with the inherent qualities of two sidedness, edge, structure, material, color and texture. These painting planes are suspended within a structural framework which assists in establishing spatial relationships, provides a means for their display without dependence on gallery editing, and allows spectator participation.

8 Marcuse, One Dimensional Man, p. 255.
within the installation itself. Each plane has rich, inviting, tactile surfaces which provide visual penetration and simultaneous interplay so as to activate playful investigation. Permanence and impermanence are required contrasts to their objecthood, establishing a dialectic that embraces space time and moves towards self extinction, as basic to their existence.

The painting planes are made up of an exotic collection of materials that evolved through a process of trial and error. Fundamental to their development were the characteristics and potentials of polymer media...specifically acrylic emulsions and resins. These two materials and their combination established the basis for further work. They have been used commercially to simulate the appearance of most traditional media but really are entirely different and complex materials. Experimentation opens up many new avenues.

The emulsions have a milk-like appearance and consistency with a high pH factor which will attack metals. When they are spread in films and allowed to dry, the water evaporates and the polymer particles are drawn together and coalesce to form odorless, colorless, transparent films of polymer.

Acrylic resin is polymer in solution form, dissolved in a strong solvent. It is initially colorless and transparent with a low pH factor ideal for protecting metals against oxidation. (9)

Both will receive pigments, dispersants, thickeners, wetting agents, extenders, preservatives or whatever ingredients desired and more importantly, both will lift

When dry in a film state from a polyethylene release. Once a six mil polyethylene sheet has been stretched out on your work surface, one can proceed working horizontally with whatever combination of acrylic laminations, pigments and additives necessary. When dry, this laminated film will readily release from the polyethylene by peeling up one edge and lifting it gradually until the whole sheet frees itself. What emerges from this process is the realization of the paint becoming integral with the physical objecthood of the painting plane. But it is also apparent that the laminations by themselves do not have lasting structural integrity and they are very susceptible to temperature extremes, ... flowing with heat and shattering with cold. The problem then becomes how to retain the revelation of the paint as the painting while facilitating its exhibition by fixing its planar and dimensional properties. A strong, light, open, inexpensive and readily available fiber was needed. Given the example of fiber-glass construction, this fiber would hopefully tie the acrylic laminations together, fixing it structurally, while still exposing the painting as a physical joining of materials on a plane.

Steel wool lent itself to this purpose, providing an exciting network, easily woven together, which shattered the dominance of the dull, flat, tight weave of canvas. Once part of the laminations, it is sufficiently strong in tension to allow suspension of the painting plane in space. Its mingling strands catch raw pigments, glitter and attenuated acrylic pours, introducing the possibility of tactile light developments within the material itself.
interacts with the paint and contributes its own color, a raw sienna rust of varying opaqueness, given the moisture and alkaline content present. It is familiar to everyone, introducing the Cubist-Dada-Pop ideas of recognizable objects and it provides an open weave of material and paint which can handle two-sided development.

Steel wool's close semblance to pubic hair was another attribute which led to its selection. A subconscious link through the material itself seemed necessary to tie the whole trauma of modernist denial together. Painting as illusion, as veil, overcomes itself by embodying it... by becoming a veil. Pubic hair was the original veil, hiding the genitals at the period of sexual maturity. Such hiding is the veil of illusionism, of weaving, of clothes, of detachment and huddling security... to see through this veil.... to reveal the primal scene is the ultimate purpose of modernist painting.\(^{(10)}\)

It is with this intent that the spatial installation of painting embraces the implemention of steel wool so readily. Painting as illusionism confronts itself by becoming a woven veil through which one actively moves overcoming detachment. The open laminated weave of steel wool opens up the painting plane physically, inviting the participant to look through and move within it, reaching out and gathering space and its random characteristics, again returning to those early directions of the Cubist movement. Space becomes not a receding illusion but an actual physical event of the painting to be experienced in conjunction with the painting. What is at hand is participation, bodily involvement, reality.... and it is with this in mind that the last charact-

ERISTIC OR STEEL WOOL BECOMES SO IMPORTANT.

STEEL WOOL OXIDIZES, IT SELF DESTRUCTS, IT IS TIME BOUND, IT DIES.... ITS ACCEPTANCE MUST BE PREDICATED ON ITS PRECARIOUS, FINITE EXISTENCE.... REALITY. THE SUSPENDED VEILS OF THE SPATIAL INSTALLATION OF PAINTING ARE TRANSIENT PRESENces SENTENCED TO EXTINCTION THROUGH THE GRADUAL DETERIORATION OF ITS STRUCTURAL FIBER. IT WAS A SENTENCE AT FIRST RECEIVED BITTERLY, IN FACT CHALLENGED, BUT WITH TIME AND GROWING FAMILIARITY, THE OXIDATION PROCESS BECAME A FINE, REALLY FINE DELICATE WAY TO GO. GIVEN A REASONABLE TIME SEQUENCE AND A SLIGHT STRUCTURAL ORDERING IT COULD BE QUITE BEAUTIFUL.(1)

THE ORDER WAS FURNISHED THROUGH THE INTRODUCTION OF A FINE BRAIDED WIRE NETWORK TO WHICH THE STEEL WOOL WAS THEN APPLIED. TIMING WAS ACCOMPLISHED WITH THE BALANCING OF MATERIAL APPLICATIONS. ONCE THE PAINTING PLANE IS SUSPENDED IN SPACE.... AND DEPENDING ON HUMIDITY AND ALKALINITY.... DETERIORATION WILL BEGIN. ALL UNLAMINATED AREAS OF STEEL WOOL WILL GRADUALLY VANISH. RESIN COATED AREAS WILL RESIST THE LONGEST, WHILE EMULSION AREAS WILL EXPERIENCE AN ALKALINE REACTION OF VARYING DEGREES, WHICH WILL ATTACK THE WOOL AND CONTRIBUTE TO A WEAKENING OF THE EMULSION'S DIMENSIONAL PROPERTIES. THERE WILL BE MOVEMENT, STRETCHING, SAGGING, DROPPING OF THE EMULSION AREAS DOWARDS OVER THE WIRE NETWORK, UNTIL IDEALLY, IT ALONE REMAINS .... SUSPENDED FROM ITS STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK.

THE FRAMEWORK ALSO EVOLVED OUT OF THE DICTATES OF THE MATERIALS IN HAND. A LIGHT, INEXPENSIVE FRAME WHICH DID NOT DOMINATE THE PAINTING PLANES OR INTIMIDATE THE PARTICIPANT BUT THAT DID ASSIST IN SUBTLY DEFINING THE

(1) LAWERENCE ALLOWAY, "ROBERT SMITHSON'S DEVELOPMENT," ARTFORUM, (NOVEMBER, 1972), P. 57.
Space was necessary. Half inch o.d. rigid conduit lengths connected with standard pipe rail sleeves afforded a good solution. A five foot module was decided on, based on the maximum ten foot length available. This system provided a means by which a structure could be erected that would hold a number of painting planes arranged to work together and create their own environment. Because of the lightness desired, diagonal tensioning was needed at various panels throughout the structure. This fit right in with the tensioning needed for each painting plane so that overall stability was accomplished through their tightening. Turnbuckles were employed at all four corners of each plane to introduce these tension vectors and also to assist in divorcing the planes from the framework.

For the Thesis Show, a cage structure was selected as a simple straightforward development which could either receive or reject the gallery space itself, but other alternatives obviously avail themselves. For instance, singular installations of solitary painting planes placed in a natural setting could easily be worked out.

The basis for the Spatial Installation of Painting rests in the aforementioned discoveries — the use of a polyethylene release in conjunction with acrylic laminations — the introduction of a braided wire, steel wool structural weave — and the suspension tensioning of the resultant painting planes from a pipe framework. From here, one can move into the specifics of the paint materials themselves.
Within each painting plane there has been a simultaneous use of acrylic emulsions and resins, either before, during or after, application of the steel wool mat. Generally, resin applications are cosmetic in purpose while the emulsions take on the job of binding themselves with the steel wool to form a stable whole (at least initially). Fortunately, the emulsions are half the price of the resins and much easier to obtain. The acrylic emulsion most used in this project was a commercial product employed in the making of latex paints called Polytex 660. It is a Celanese Corp. product and available locally. Polytex is comparable in all aspects to the more costly Rohm Haas product, Rhoplex AC-34. If a harder paint film was desired or stiffening of an area receiving greater stresses required, Elmer's Glue was added... again a cheaper more readily available alternative to the harder polymers of Rohm Haas, AC-61 and AC-73.

Because of their different roles the two polymers also take on different color characteristics. The resins receive pigment with great ease, experiencing no color distortion with little agitated dispersion necessary. They are particularly effective in glaze applications over a dried emulsion field where pigment drag or sedimentation is a desired effect. The pigment itself, in a moving pour, seeking out its own intensities as to the surface irregularities it passes over. It is also useful in a spraygun application for coating steel wool areas where oxidation is not intended. The most useful acrylic resins are Acryloid F-10 (Rohm Haas) and a DuPont product.
PURCHASED IN CRYSTALINE FORM CALLED ELVACITE. BOTH ARE SOLUBLE IN MINERAL SPIRITS WHICH IS AS TOXIC AS ANYONE SHOULD GO WITHOUT WELL-CONTROLLED VENTILATION.

THE EMULSIONS RUN THE GAMUT FROM DEEP OPAQUE STRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENTS TO THIN FILM TRANSPARENCIES. THEY DO NOT RECEIVE PIGMENTS AS READILY AS THE RESINS AND EXPERIMENTATION IS NECESSARY TO GET THE FEEL. ADDITIVES ARE NEEDED MANY TIMES DEPENDING ON THE SPECIFIC GRAVITY OF THE MATERIALS IN USE. THERE IS ALSO A TINT DISTORTION BECAUSE OF ITS INITIAL MILK-LIKE APPEARANCE. IF PIGMENT DISPERSION NEEDS TO BE ASSISTED, THE ROHM HAAS ADDITIVES TAMOL 731 AND TRITON CF-10 CAN BE USED. THE PRESENCE OF TOO LITTLE OR TOO MUCH ADDITIVE CAN HAVE AN ADVERSE EFFECT ON THE COLOR UNIFORMITY AND STABILITY OF THE FINISHED PAINT. THE BEST WAY TO APPROACH AN APPROXIMATE DETERMINATION OF ADDITIVE NEEDED, IS TO TAKE YOUR DRY PIGMENT AND MIX IT WITH SUFFICIENT WATER TO FORM A STIFF SLIGHTLY MOIST PASTE. THEN ADD IN SMALL-EQUAL INCREMENTS THE WETTING AGENT TRITON CF-10 AND THE DISPERGANT TAMOL 731 MIXING WELL. WHEN THE PIGMENT MASS BECOMES FLUID ENOUGH SO THAT SURFACE RIPPLES DISAPPEAR ON GENTLE SHAKING OF THE CONTAINER, THE PIGMENT IS SUFFICIENTLY DISPersed. THIS THEN CAN BE ADDED TO THE EMULSION MEDIUM. IT IS A CRUDE, BUT DEPENDABLE APPROXIMATION WHICH ALLOWS ONE TO REMAIN WITHIN THE PROCESS AT HAND WITHOUT TIME CONSUMING DISTRACTION ..., A CONCERN THAT TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER ALL QUALITY CONTROL.

THICKENERS CAN ALSO BE USED WITH ACRYLIC EMULSIONS TO INCREASE VISCOSITY FOR MORE DETAILED OR ATTENUATED PASSAGES THROUGH THE STEEL WOOL. THE
Rohm Haas product, Acrysol GS is recommended. Foaming is another phenomenon of the polymer emulsion which creates interesting dispersions through steel wool. In a flat lamination foaming will result in a cratering of the dried film, ideal for catching the pigment of a later resin pour. It can be created through extending the emulsion with water or adding the Rohm Haas agent, Triton X-100.

When the emulsion and resin are applied one after the other over the same area, there is another interesting reaction. The emulsion, with its water base and the resin with its solvent base repel one another, creating on their own, amorphous organic groupings of paint. Once dry these groupings can then be captured with a follow up lamination of clear emulsion. The artist applies peripheral control through color selection, pigment and polymer densities, quantity of cover, etc. but fundamentally his hand has been removed from the image making. Brush figuration does not enter in .... removed in an attempt to avoid any tie to figurative message making.

Through and through, the spatial installation of painting is concerned with an objecthood which is a primal experience and not a message. From the paint formation to its deterioration a physical event tied directly to its objecthood is occurring. The installation is open ended and not a thing-in-itself, but rather a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region. It is dialectically seen in a manifold of relations and not as an isolated object.... this can
be the only way to accept it. And its relations are de-
manding. One senses the need for the installation to
merge into the great out-of-doors, to take on the ele-
ments, to lose its order ... to vanish. Again, Neruda
sets the scene, speaking of the ocean, his teacher:

And all that I learn is remembered. It is air,
it is sand, it is water, the interminable wind.

The young think it little,
coming to live here with their fires;
Yet out of those recesses where a pulse once
ascended or sank to its void,
the crackle and freeze of the blue,
a star's granulation,
the tender deployment of waves
that squander their snow on the foam,
the reticent power, undeflectable,
a stone throne on the deep,
my wayward despondency, heaping oblivion higher,
turned, until suddenly all my existence was changed:

And I cling with the whole of my being to what is purest in
movement. (12)

From an art of illusion, to an art of autonomous
objects, to an art penetrating the world, of movement,
process, participation, iconoclastically derived, precariously
based .... As any horse player knows .... This is our open

12. Ben Belitt, ed. Pablo Neruda, A New Decade (Poems
end. There is no way to express the energy generated from such involvement, but it is enough to be self-sufficient.

One laments the tragic loss of Robert Smithson, perhaps its greatest spokesman. He set the earnest tone for those addicted to its energy.

Artists themselves are not confined, but their output is. Museums, like asylums, and jails, have wards and cells — in other words, neutral rooms called 'galleries.' A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral. Works of art seen in such spaces seem to be going through a kind of esthetic convalescence. They are looked upon as so many inanimate invalids, waiting for critics to pronounce them curable or incurable. The function of the warden - curator is to separate art from the rest of society. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffectual, abstracted, safe and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society. All is reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise. Innovations are allowed only if they support this kind of confinement.

Art's development should be dialectical and not metaphysical. I am speaking of a dialectics that seeks a world outside of cultural confine-
Also, I am not interested in art works that suggest 'process' within the metaphysical limits of the neutral room. There is no freedom in that kind of behavioral game playing. The artist acting like a B. F. Skinner rat doing his 'tough' little tricks is something to be avoided. Confined process is no process at all. It would be better to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom.\(^{(13)}\)

Freedom and nothing less is demanded. To give oneself up into a dialectic that takes into account the direct effect of the elements as they exist from day to day... to interact with the physical contradictions of natural forces, as both sunny and stormy, is an extraordinary experience for the artist conditioned to cultural confinement. The spatial installation of painting initiates the development and fills one with vast expectations.

But once in my life I saw plainly: one evening in India; they were burning a woman by the banks of a river, her bones and her body were burning;
I saw something move out of the burning sarcophagus -- call it smoke or a spirit --
till nothing was left of the fire or the woman or the ashes or the coffin. Evening had fallen.
There was night and the water, the dark
and the river, steadfast in that place and that dying.\(^{(19)}\)


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