

FLAT and DEEP

Perspective and Autonomy in Modernism

by Susan Post



"Daniel Buren's Garden" by Volker Kühn
<http://www.artinboxes.de/HOM/PAG/buren-garden.htm>

Painting is, miraculously, both a rectangle and a box. It is pure and still, but at the same time it can hold anything.... As painters invite back all that was banished -- sunsets, flowers, history, philosophy, the body -- they have a responsibility to painting's special powers. ... Unlike the gallery box, a good painting does not disintegrate after a month. Some have held our attention for hundreds of years. A good painting also does not depend on textual support and can thus cross national and linguistic borders and communicate over time. In a word, good paintings are autonomous.

from n+1: Dushko Petrovich, "Toward a Practical Avant-Garde"

Coinciding with the development of Modernism over the past 150 years, the content of painting – a two-dimensional, autonomous art object once valued mainly for its illusionistic or expressive qualities – has increasingly revolved around its facture, as the effects and devices used to make materials into pictures have been systematically investigated and deconstructed. One thread that runs throughout every stage and style of art is that it in some way addresses the issue of space, whether projected or perceptual, or even entirely "squeezed out" of the picture plane. This inherent rendering of depth – or its absence – on a surface seems at times to beckon the viewer to enter into that pictorial space or, alternatively, to confront the beholder with its flatness in the actual space they mutually inhabit. James Elkins proposes, in *The Poetics of Perspective*, "the founding of modernism was bound up with a rejection of perspective, a rejection that has itself been abandoned in postmodern developments. ...[However,] it may be argued that perspective itself helped give post-Renaissance art the impetus to continual innovation which was a fundamental condition for modernism." [p. 2] In *Art and Illusion*, E.H.Gombrich connects what he feels is the human proclivity towards illusionism with a paradoxical antipathy to it.

Our pleasure in illusion...rests precisely in the mind's effort in bridging the difference between art and reality... To create a harmonious pattern in the plane, [the artist] must be able to rely on identical shapes remaining identical and steps

in hue remaining independent of the beholder's imagination. In illusionistic painting, neither is the case. The ambiguity of the canvas destroys the artist's control over his elements. I believe this is the real explanation for the revulsion against illusionism that set in at the very time when its means were perfected. They were found to be inartistic, they militated against visual harmony.

When artists extract illusionary three-dimensional space from marks on a two-dimensional surface they are "[o]n a sensory level, if not theoretically ... always conscious of what Josef Albers saw as "the discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect, a polarity which to him is "the origin of art." [Seitz, p 18] The cohabitation of this polarity within a work of art is partly responsible for the ambiguity or uncanniness found in so much of modernist art, and these attributes are themselves attached to the indexical and temporal nature of the autonomous art object.

In the introduction to his translation of Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Christopher S. Wood quotes Panofsky from *The Concept of Artistic Volition* (1920): "Artistic products...are not statements by subjects, but formulations of material, not events but results," and goes on to comment: "Any historical treatment would have to acknowledge the autonomy of such an object, the impossibility of deriving the object from its phenomenological circumstances." In a review of Wood's translation, Joel Snyder (also a translator of Panofsky), addresses Panofsky's attitude toward autonomy:

His insistence on the "timeless validity and self-sufficiency" of visual art may strike us now as quaint, but what it amounts to is a claim that we are able to identify works of art as such, irrespective of the time in which they were made or the context of their production. Moreover, works of art have, in addition to intrinsic significance, an extrinsic one as well; they combine a timeless, autonomous element and a time-bound, contingent (historical) component. The full significance of a work of art involves a braiding of the two....

According to Woods, early Formalists such as Wolfflin and, particularly, Riegl conceived of a “more than phenomenal” content in a work of art, relating to formal, opposite dyads such as haptic and optic, internal and external unity, and coordination and subordination. At its core, a painting contains and exhibits the first of these sets of opposite traits by being both flat and deep, most other dualisms being (if such a qualifier is valid here) less inherent than this one, with the possible exception of that of figure and ground.

Since Modernism began, the erstwhile transparency of the picture plane – the interception of the canvas with an indexical projection of figures in space as seen or imagined by the artist – has been rejected and embraced, scumbled, occluded⁽¹⁾, and retooled as a mirror. In the essay “Representation, Appropriation and Power” in *Beyond Recognition*, Craig Owens provides the structuralist definition of transparency:

To claim that representation is transparent to its objects is not to define it as mimetic or illusionistic – maps, for example, do not simulate visual experience. Rather, it means that every element of the work of art is *significant*, that is, it refers to something that exists independently of its representation. Thus, “transparency” designates a perfect equivalence between reality and its representation; signifier and signified mirror one another... So accustomed have we become to this formulation of the problem of representation – through works of art that call attention to their own material properties, and through an art history that teaches us to view them as more or less harmonious or dissonant combinations of lines and colors – that we may have difficulty in appreciating what Foucault and Marin identify as the absolutely fundamental condition of representation, at least as it was conceived in the 17th century, and that is its

[1] Gombrich; from “The What and the How”: pp236-238 “The world, we have seen, never looks like a picture mainly because we move through the world and in doing so we are guided by the transformation of aspects that occurs all around us.... For the so-called constancies may be described as the degree of unexpectedness of what will occlude what in our field of vision....There are many variants of this experiment, from drawing the view on a windowpane to measuring the size of one's mirror image on the mirror's surface.” Vuillard, Baldassari, and James Hyde use ‘blocking out’ (as distinct from ‘erasing’) as a part of their pictorial syntax.

transparency (which is not the same thing as illusionism [p 98]It has lately become more common, when referring to the medium itself – most often film and photography, both based on single-point perspective – as being “transparent”, to mean that there is an apparent absence of an author.[Owens p 111]

Over the second half of the twentieth century Formalist critics and ‘post’-modernist practitioners have concentrated on the troubled relationship between the beholder and the art object, and the distinction between dueling artistic impulses that Michael Fried calls absorption and theatricality,⁽²⁾ which has sparked fiercely competing artistic practices, engaged in unresolved debate. In a symposium on Jeff Wall’s work at the Tate in 2005 Fried repeated his conviction, first expressed in the essays “Art and Objecthood” and “Shape as Form”, that the autonomy of the work of art is associated with its relationship with the viewer, and that the modern movement came about when it did because

...the basic truth or primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld could no longer be neutralized or negated or even be put in abeyance, even temporarily, by pictorial strategies at work in the art of David, Gericault, Courbet, Millet and others. The name of that crisis is, of course, is Edouard Manet.

Fried goes on to characterize “ambitious French painting after Manet [as that which] acknowledged painting’s ‘facingness’, not flatness as is usually said, while nevertheless resolving an imaginative space for itself, that was not wholly given over to the beholder’s whims and fashions.” Jeff Wall’s lightbox projections of his digitally

[2] from John Russel review of the book *Absorption and Theatricality*: NYT Jan. 11th,1981
 “At the risk of oversimplifying an exceptionally subtle and tenacious argument, one could say that by “absorption” Mr. Fried means a state of inner concentration and reflecting stillness. By “theatricality” he means the antithesis of absorption: the wish to grab at the spectator by means no matter how trashy and melodramatic.”

processed photographs not only directly address the strategies by which Modernist paintings confront 'facingness' and spatial relativity , but manage to do so in a way that updates and revises those strategies, taking into account recent advances in contemporary media. Successfully applying these innovations to the more traditional practice of painting is what amounts to a modern grail, but not one that I will attempt to describe or define at this time.

Cracks in the hegemony of paint resurfaced with the Dadaist movement, climaxing in the minimalists' premature claim to have achieved the 'death of painting'. These cracks have been widened by practices ranging from earthworks to installations of readymade objects to performance-based and relational art, that continue to undermine whatever authority painting still enjoys. In "Art and Objecthood," Fried describes the sculptor Tony Smith's epiphanous nighttime freeway ride, in which

...the object is, so to speak, *replaced* by something: for example, on the turnpike by the constant onrush of the road, the simultaneous recession of new reaches of dark pavement illumined by the onrushing headlights, the sense of the turnpike itself as ... existing for Smith alone....[I]n each case being able to go on and on indefinitely is of the essence. What replaces the object – what does the same job of distancing or isolating the beholder – is above all the endlessness, or objectlessness, of the approach or on rush of perspective. [p134]

Smith aspires to a sense of absence-of-limits similar to that to which Panofsky refers, when defining how perspective operates phenomenologically within visual art: "For it is not only the effect of perspectival construction, but indeed its intended purpose, to realize in the representation of space precisely the homogeneity and boundlessness foreign to the direct experience of that space." [pp 30-31] An interesting twist on this

effect of infinite or at least unknown boundaries is Jeff Wall's photograph, "Night", as Briony Fer notes in her published remarks from the Tate symposium:

Calibrating that point of losing sight of figures in landscape is taken to extremes, pushing it to an almost absurd limit. It becomes a temporal rather than only a spatial issue as second by second, the picture enacts the precarious coming into vision of pictorial representation. It is an exercise in calibrating the effects of darkness, finely tuned to create the phenomenological experience of seeing in the dark. From this point of view, *Night* seems like an exercise, not only in the control of the medium, but in how far it is possible to go before one loses the symbolic matrix of representation, and before it can be redeemed as a picture. [p 80]

This effect is neither new nor exclusive to photography – a similar period of adjustment is needed to acclimate one's vision to Whistler's *Nocturne*, or the darker geometric abstract painting, *Painting*, by Ad Reinhardt, for example.

The autonomy of a work of art has depended increasingly on the active participation of the beholder to register the painting's demonstration of phenomenological and optical effect and what Fried has referred to as its 'objecthood', rather than allowing their attention to be absorbed by the object in front of them, in a suspension of disbelief and passive acceptance of the transparency of the picture plane. The autonomy of the painting, according to Fried, increases in proportion to its refusal to acknowledge the existence of the beholder by either pictorially or phenomenologically emitting the quality of self-absorption, and is counteracted by insistent confrontation that disrupts that effect and ultimately replaces the object which he calls 'theatricality'.

Smith's account of his experience on the turnpike bears witness to theatre's profound hostility to the arts, and discloses, precisely in the absence of the object, and in what takes its place, what might be called the theatricality of objecthood. ...[T]he imperative that modernist painting defeat or suspend its objecthood is at bottom the imperative that it *defeat or suspend theatre*. And *this* means that there is a war going on between theatre and modernist painting,

between the theatrical and the pictorial – a war that, despite the literalists' explicit rejection of modernist painting and sculpture, is not basically a matter of program and ideology, but of experience, conviction, and sensibility.[p 135]

At the symposium on Wall, in London, Fried reprised his theory of absorption and theatricality, saying that "[e]ven the slightest failure to create the illusion of absorption was registered by the beholder as a failure of authenticity on the part of the depicted figures, and ultimately on the part of both painting and painter, as if such a work was seeking only to appear oblivious to the presence of the beholder, while in fact making every effort to solicit his or her applause." In "Shape as Form" Fried tracked the development from the paintings of Pollock, Newman and Louis to what he saw as the "emergence of a new, exclusively visual mode of illusionism"[p 79] in the paintings of Stella, Noland and Olitski, quoting Clement Greenberg from "Modernist Painting":

The flatness toward which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an utter flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l'oeil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness...the universal power of any mark to suggest something like depth belongs not so much to the art of painting as to the eye itself.[p 78]

Over the years Greenberg's writing on perspectival space has been somewhat confusing and self-contradictory. In "Modernist Painting" he strove to evict spatial allusion from painting, but considered neither optical illusion nor representation to be anathema.

"Modernist painting in its latest phase has not abandoned the representation of recognizable objects in principle. What it has abandoned in principle is the representation of the kind of space that recognizable objects can inhabit." [MP 310]

Abstractness, or the non-figurative, has in itself still not proved to be an altogether necessary moment in the self-criticism of pictorial art, even though artists as eminent as Kandinsky and Mondrian have thought so. As such,

representation, or illustration, does not attain the uniqueness of pictorial art; what does do so is the associations of things represented. All recognizable entities (including pictures themselves) exist in three-dimensional space, and the barest suggestion of a recognizable entity suffices to call up associations of that kind of space. The fragmentary silhouette of a human figure, or of a teacup, will do so, and by doing so alienate pictorial space from the literal two-dimensionality which is the guarantee of painting's independence as an art.
[Greenberg,MPp310]

Because our own suggestibility works against a painting's autonomy, and because figurative allusion implies an imaginary space, abstraction is merely an unavoidable fork on the road painting must take to "achieve autonomy" – by distinguishing itself from the three-dimensional object. "For... three-dimensionality is the province of sculpture. To achieve autonomy, painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture, and it is in its effort to do this, and not so much -- I repeat -- to exclude the representational or literary, that painting has made itself abstract." [MPp310] But at the 1982 conference in Halifax on 'Modernism and Modernity' – twenty years after writing "Modernist Painting" – Greenberg gave a talk called "To Cope With Decadence" in which he distanced himself, slightly, from his earlier position.

Now it's no longer a question of the irresistibility of illusionism, now it's become the effect pure and simple of continuing vitality of Western art...That vitality shows itself nowadays in Modernism. Modernist art goes away from illusionism." Greenberg also reaffirmed that "it's hard to make sense of the history of culture or of art without entertaining the notion of autonomy. [p 162- 163 M & M]

And in discussion afterwards he denied ever having formulated a prescription for literalist painting, insisting instead that it was "nothing but a description" of the direction that the avant-garde had taken, and not a map, regardless of the purpose for which it had been used by Fried and other post-modernist critics. [p268 in Modernism-

Modernity] Greenberg admitted to having “revised” his definition of Modernism since writing “Modernist Painting”, to “an attempt to rescue and maintain the best standards of the past...by innovation.” [ibid] Greenberg described himself as a Formalist, which to him meant basing his opinions on what was actually in the picture in front of him, before (or without?) ascribing meaning or intentionality, or even cultural context. He adduced the autonomy of the successful work of art by stating that “aesthetic experience is intuitive and, as intuitive experience, it cannot be taken apart by discourse.” [p 168 ibid]

Panofsky, in contrast, sought to sort out the effect of perspective on the psyche. He writes in *Perspective as Symbolic Form* that “Perspective creates distance between human beings and things...but then in turn it abolishes this distance by, in a sense, drawing this world of things, an autonomous world confronting the individual, into the eye.” [p 67] Dramatic historical changes in rendering or staging spatial effect have indicated that “it is essential to ask of artistic periods and regions not only whether they have perspective, but also which perspective they have,”[p41] Panofsky concludes that these mechanisms for rendering space are “a systematic abstraction from the structure of this psychophysiological space...In a sense perspective transforms psychological space into mathematical space.” [pp30-31] A similar distinction is made almost forty year later by Johannes Itten about color in his book *Elements of Color* : “The color agent is the ...pigment, the colorant. It acquires meaning and content by optic and cerebral perception. ...Color perception is the psychophysiological reality as distinguished from the physiochemical reality of color. Psychophysiological color reality

is what I call color effect.” [p 17]] Color is utilized to create space in a painting by exploiting both its intrinsic associative influences as well as the atmospheric effect of desaturation.

In her chapter “Colour for the Painter” in *Color: Art and Science*, edited by Bourrieau and Lamb, the British Optical painter Bridget Riley spells out the relationship between pictorial and perceptual color and its historical context [I quote at length]:

For perceptual space the painter has to invent pictorial space. The same applies to our perceptions of form and weight, etc.; each sensation must be recast in pictorial terms. And if these are to ‘work’, as painters say, then together they must create a pictorial reality which is credible – so a painter has to find a way of uniting all the elements in a picture to make a whole.” [p 32] Titian as inventor of colour envelope...a single, unifying color...”...in an invented spatial structure which is entirely credible. This extraordinary new way of *drawing* a picture with *colour* rather than line, is the beginning of Titian’s great innovation, the approach to colour that was to put European painting on a road that no other tradition had trod before, or for that matter, since.

At the other end of this tradition, which sprang from Titian’s astounding insight into the unity of colour, stand the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. ... [Monet’s] pictorial colour is unified by a perceptual ‘*enveloppe*’, as he called it. This famous envelope is the bridge by which Monet can cross from the thing seen to the thing painted. [pp 33 – 34]

The confrontation between the space of the image and the space of the beholder has been mediated over time by both color and perspective drawing, with one or the other emerging as the dominant factor. It is interesting to note a recent trend in contemporary art that involves depiction of imaginary or ‘postcard’ landscapes,⁽³⁾

[3] William Wegman, Sandy Litchfield, and possibly Jennifer Bartlett, are examples of painters working with this motif.

perhaps marking a temporary return – in the perception of perspective – to drawing. Historically, the use of color to depict pictorial space that began well before Alberti's discussion of the *disegni et colore* controversy in *Della Pittura*, has predominated since the advent of modernism and remains a perennial and central concern. Yves Alain Bois has taken a variant point of view that, even after Titian's color-spaces and Monet's *enveloppe*, drawing and painting can be broken apart into two distinct practices, based on materials and technique.

Now, the major difference between the space of drawing and that of painting concerns the nature of the support. Since the time of Alberti, the picture plane is assumed as transparent in painting, but the condition sine qua non of this transparency is that the supporting ground be covered over without reserve.

Conversely, as Walter Benjamin has remarked, "[A] drawing that completely covered its background would cease to be a drawing."...And maybe it's just for that, for having cancelled the difference between these two historically heterogeneous registers, that Cézanne is the father of modern art....[I]f, as Merleau-Ponty has stated, Cézanne's goal was to paint perception itself...he would have had to activate the opposition between figure and ground that is at the foundation of our human perception; and the ascent of the support – namely, the contamination of the pictorial field by the graphic one – was the best route to take, perhaps, even, the only one. [p 42 -43{pdf 13-14}]

This evokes Craig Owens's definition of transparency, which "can only be achieved through a strategy of concealment: for example, the legendary transparency of the picture plane prescribed in Alberti's *Della Pittura*" was attained only by effacing the image's material support." [p 111]

Riley credits *chiaroscuro* – using cues from strong directional light to model form and carve space with shadows – for having "neatly circumscribed the problems raised by Titian's colour space. It also had the advantage of being highly conceptualized; that is to say, it introduced into painting a view of light as being separate from colour." [p39]

The device of *chiaroscuro* also touches on an important and ancient spatial concept so far only briefly mentioned, that of the binary distinction between figure and ground. In *Art and Illusion*, beginning with the realization by ancient Greek potters that they could render figure against ground either by painting the figures with black slip onto red clay ground or by engraving red figures into a black (slip) ground, Gombrich succinctly derives the foundation for modeling – the representation of an illuminated figure in space:

No medium illustrates the code character of this gradation more clearly than that of the mosaic. Four graded tones of tesserae will suffice for the mosaicists of classical antiquity to suggest the basic relationships of form in space. .. They exemplify the relational cryptograms which remained in use throughout Western art: the contrast of figure and ground on the one hand and, within the figure, the modifications of 'local color' through the simple 'more' or 'less' of light.[p 37]

Value is also an inherent characteristic of spectral colors, and when two colors of the same value are juxtaposed it can result in a subtle, shimmering movement across the edge, as the eye attempts to perceive the distinction in hue alone. Color theorists have determined that a value shift of at least two steps (out of a scale from 1 – 10, black to white) is necessary for a perception of space to emerge. Robert Delaunay, in his 1912 "Essay on Light", "attributed the movement of colours less to transparency than to the qualities of hue. Movement is given by the relationship of *unequal measures*, of contrasts of colours among themselves with constitute *Reality*. This reality has *depth*.... and thus becomes *rhythmic Simultaneity*." [Gage in Luanne's workbook] I hope I am not mistaken for interpreting Delaunay here to really mean 'color' when he uses the word "hue", and that the "qualities" he refers to are therefore its constituents: hue, value and saturation. But as William Seitz points out in the catalogue for the

perceptual abstraction MoMA exhibition *The Responsive Eye*, subsequent generations have determined that “[chromatic] color is unnecessary for perceptual ambiguity, variability, and movement.” [p30] All of these effects can be made to occur on a two-dimensional surface using a subset of hues, without reference to either objective form or narrative content.

Gombrich had astutely associated many of the major challenges in representing perspectival space to dealing with the absence of movement.

We use clues of touch, texture to measure our guesses against, “[b]ut all these clues...are subsidiary to the test of movement. ... In the course of time, artists have in fact succeeded in stimulating one after the other of these clues on which we mainly rely in stationary one-eyed vision, and the result is that mastery of trompe-l’oeil illusion in which painting beat the mechanical means of photography by a few generations. [p 232]

He credits Manet with using “the very ambiguity of his flickering forms to suggest a variety of readings and to compensate thereby for the absence of movement in the painting.”[p 181] Far from being an attempt to incorporate the multiple viewpoints of an encircled subject into a single image, for Gombrich Cubism is better understood as

the most radical attempt to stamp out ambiguity and to enforce one reading of the picture – that of a man-made construction, a colored canvas. If illusion is due to the interactions of clues and the absence of contradictory evidence, the only way to fight its transforming influence is to make the clues contradict each other and to prevent a coherent image of reality from destroying the pattern in the plane.[211]

Cubism, Gombrich submits, is a repudiation of depicted space, the intentional construction of indecipherable space.

Cubism sometimes been explained as an extreme attempt in compensation for the shortcomings of one-eyed vision. The picture embodies clues of which we could become aware only through movement or touch....The main impulse

behind cubism must have been an artistic one. It is hardly just to look at cubism mainly as a device to increase our awareness of space. If that was its aim, it should be pronounced a failure. Where it succeeds is in countering the transforming effects of an illusionistic reading. [p 239]

Building on Berenson's postulate of 'seeing and knowing', Gombrich connects spatial decoding with a shifting point of view:

It is to the three-dimensional world that our organism is attuned, where it learns to test its anticipations against the flow of incoming stimuli, weeding out or confirming the predictable melodies of transformation that result from movement. The relationships in the plane that the illusionistic painter has learned to attend to are of not biological relevance. They are studied in the highly artificial situation of one-eyed stationary vision.[p 278]

The invention of photography in the second half of the 19th century landed a strong but far from lethal blow to the autonomy of painting. The ability to make relatively quick and detailed recordings of objects, flora and fauna, inside buildings and out-of-doors, instead incited ambitious Modernist painters to mount an avant-garde, discarding mimesis for phenomenological investigations into both perception and materials. Gombrich directly credits photography with stimulating this progress: "Fidelity to nature has to be achieved within the limits of the medium, Once this compact between the artist and the beholder is destroyed, we are outside the pale of art. Indeed as soon as Daguerre's...mechanical methods entered the field, art had to shift the goalposts, and move the pale elsewhere." [Gombrich p xxiv] Depictions of space gave way – in the daring and brilliant (and sometimes failed) innovations of painters like Seurat, van Gogh and Cezanne – to various solutions that created or suggested space, and finally to the undermining by the Cubists of the very suggestibility of space itself.

One reason photography represents such a threat to painting is what Laura Mulvey, in her talk at the Wall symposium refers to as “the photograph’s own paradoxical relationship to time, as Roland Barthes puts it, its ‘this was then.’” The temporality of the photograph is more explicit than that of a painting partly because it is literally an instantaneous recording, rather than a belabored construction over time, an issue Fried addresses in “Art and Objecthood,” in terms of theatricality, and which he found ties it directly to Surrealism.

The literalist preoccupation with time – more precisely, with the *duration of the experience* – is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical: as though theatre confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of *time*; or as though the sense which, at bottom, theatre addresses is a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, *simultaneously approaching and receding*, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective. . . .” [and it’s footnote: “The connection between spatial recession and some such experience of temporality – almost as if the first were a kind of natural metaphor for the second – is present in much Surrealist painting. . . . Moreover, temporality – manifested, for example, as expectation, dread, anxiety, presentment, memory, nostalgia, stasis – is often the explicit subject of their paintings.”]

There is ... a deep affinity between literalist and Surrealist sensibility ...[b]oth employ imagery that is at once wholistic [sic] and, in a sense, fragmentary, incomplete; both resort to similar anthropomorphising of objects or conglomerations of objects. ...both are capable of achieving remarkable effects of “presence”; and both tend to isolate objects and persons in *situations* – the closed room and the abandoned artificial landscape are as important to Surrealism as to literalism. ... This sensibility can be summed up by saying that Surrealist sensibility ... and literalist sensibility are both *theatrical*.” [both p. 145]

But temporality in painting was resurrected as a direct concern, as Bois and Rosalind Krause explain in their article on Cézanne in *October* magazine, noting that

Raphael gets to something that is unique to Cézanne, at least before Pollock, something that specifically fascinated Marden, namely, this abolition of perceptual time, corresponding to an infinite copenetration of levels that nevertheless remain discrete.”[p 40 {pdf 11}]

They go on to relate Marden's description of Pollock's "working" of his colors: how rather than being able to tell the order in which they were painted, and thus to recreate a timeline of it's making, "...there's always some point where you lose the trail; you just can't read it because it never reads as layering... all those marks and colors become the real space of the painting." [ibid]

In his remarkable essay for the exhibition catalogue *Before Photography* Peter Galassi, the Museum of Modern Art's current curator of photography who also mounted the 2007 exhibition of Wall's work at that museum, presents an exegesis of pictorial composition as a condition of contemporaneous practice. Basic composition of a picture is made up of an arrangement of subject or moment in time, point-of-view [POV], and scope of view (the edges of the picture). Historically, Galassi's two extreme, limiting cases are, on the one hand, Uccello, who first determined a POV and bounds to set a measured stage, which he then filled according to rules of perspective. The other way of dividing pictorial space is represented by Degas, who depicted the world as an uninterrupted field of potential pictures from which a certain POV is chosen, the edges then determined (cropped) by the content chosen to depict. Both are composed, but Uccello's plane is static and neutral and comprehensive (a logical construction from the pieces to the whole – a synthesis, in which the viewer is ignored) , while Degas's is active and fragmentary (an aspect selected from the whole – an analysis, in which the viewer can participate) [p16] "This sense of the picture as a detail, carved from a greater, more complex whole, is a characteristic, original feature of nineteenth century art." [p 26] Galassi traces a shift in the way people looked at pictures to the distinct

practices of making compositional sketches (*ébauche*) and sketching for accuracy in nature (*étude*) which “served opposite functions. The former was a record of imagination, the latter of reality.” [p 20] This division of perception laid the groundwork for photography which, based as it was on POV and mundane observation, was particularly well-suited to its time. And as noted above, Galassi has placed the cause for this shift of focus in perspective in general, and the chosen convention of the vantage point, in particular.

The Renaissance system of perspective harnessed vision as a rational basis of picture-making. Initially, however, perspective was conceived only as a tool for the construction of three dimensions out of two. Not until much later was this conception replaced – as the common, intuitive standard – by its opposite: the derivation of a frankly flat picture from a given three-dimensional world.[p.18]

By stressing the formative role of the vantage point, the artist seems to step aside as the viewer bluntly confronts the world of the picture. Thus in the history of perspective each new norm of pictorial logic, by scuttling an existing convention, appears in its time as an achievement of realism. ...the establishment of a new convention.[p 19]

In her talk on Jeff Wall’s *After Spring Snow, by Yukio Mishima Ch 35*, “Laura Mulvey refers to both the temporality and the indexical nature of photography, but adds that Wall’s innovation is to build an image that defies this heritage.

The image depicted a moment of time, but went far beyond, outside, the photography aesthetic associated with indexicality, that I was trying, unsuccessfully, to bring to it. ... [The picture was actually composed of many images taken over a comparatively long period of time – digitally enhanced] ... I realized that I had undergone ... an experience of a technological ‘uncanny’, a moment of ignorant bewilderment, when confronted by a phenomenon which in fact can be rather easily explained, through the use of a new and unfamiliar technology, and which once it’s understood, the uncanniness of the technology is very easily diffused.

Mulvey remarks how she was reminded, by the initial discomfort with the technological disconnect she experienced in front of Wall's piece, of the intense and prolonged upheaval caused by modernization.

In some ways this experience gave me a sense of solidarity with the confusion felt by people in the nineteenth century, in relation to a new technological phenomena, whether it might be electricity, or photography, and it took me back to that 'now' of the technological changes, revolutions that we are undergoing in the present, to that sense of almost perpetual technological revolution that was experienced in the nineteenth century.

Wall's digital projections and photographs make repeated and avowed allusions to Modernist painting, for example, to Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergeres* in his *Picture for Women*, which Company notes "simultaneously makes visible photography's picture plane while preserving the medium's claim to spatial illusionism and social description. Wall's photograph presents deep space while foregrounding its flatness." He continues:

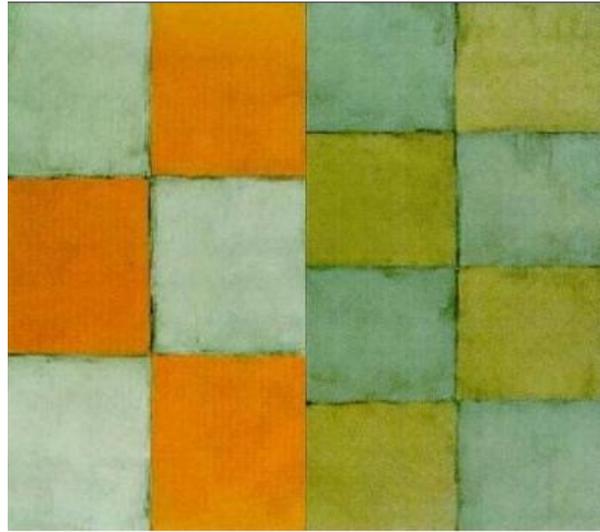
...*Picture for Women* dramatizes and finds its own unique solution to photography's split loyalty to Modernism. Pulled in opposite directions, photographic Modernism has a wish to be 'true to itself' by producing illusionistic space and a wish to negate this and bring the viewer up to its characteristically invisible surface...*Picture for Women* may be unique but it is not alone in its articulation of the paradoxes of depth and flatness inherent in photography's desire for self analysis... and the privileged position afforded *Picture for Women* stems in large measure from its avowed connection to Manet's proto-modernist painting rather than to other photography. The subject matter, painting style, compositions and figures in Manet's works are flattened, sketchy and estranged. In this Manet anticipated the reification being wrought by consumer culture and optical machines alike, both of which came to trouble painting's idea of classical unity.

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Postmodernism was an attempt to find rupture where there was none, and Jeff Wall's seamless digital photomontages are a testament to that fact. His work incorporates not only the most recent technological advances in two-dimensional imaging, but places itself smack-within the historical context of Modernist picture-making. *A Sudden Gust of Wind: after Hokusai* exemplifies both Modernism's defining self-critique, the literalist repudiation of what Fried calls 'facingness' in a melding of his putatively irreconcilable qualities of absorption and theatricality, as well as confronting the contemporary sensation of pervasively uncertain reality. In his book *Persistence and Resistance* the painter Sean Scully locates the modernist sensation of unease in the alienating effect modernization has had on people.

Just as a contemporary snapshot is isolated and independent from every other contemporary snapshot, so too van Gogh's paintings registered the alienation that was just beginning to make its appearance on our cultural horizon. For others it was out of focus, but van Gogh gripped it and was gripped by it in return...His power and problem was that he used a nineteenth-century medium to express a twentieth-century anxiety... The casualty felt among painters of the twentieth century is something van Gogh began. Photography in particular is an art form that came along exactly at the right cultural-historical moment to put some distance between us and what we were doing to our world." [p 39]

How – or even, whether – a contemporary and meaningful representation of a moment in place and time can again be embodied in a painting is the perennial challenge for artists working in that most traditional medium, one that Scully, Hodgkin and others are working hard to accomplish.



Union Yellow Sean Scully

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