Inside the White Cube

The Ideology of the Gallery Space

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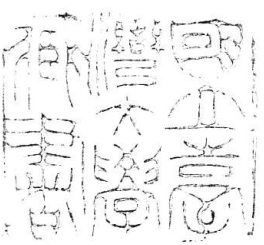
Introduction by Thomas McEvilley



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As modernism gets older, context becomes content. In a peculiar reversal, the object introduced into the gallery "frames" the gallery and its laws.

A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, "to take on its own life." The discreet desk may be the only piece of furniture. In this context a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred object, just as the firehose in a modern museum looks not like a firehose but an esthetic conundrum. Modernism's transposition of perception from life to formal values is complete. This, of course, is one of modernism's fatal diseases.

Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial – the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of "period" (late modern), there is no time. This eternity gives the gallery a limbolike status; one has to have died already to be there. Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not – or are tolerated only as kinesthetic mannekins for further study. This Cartesian paradox is reinforced by one of the icons of our visual culture: the installation shot, *sans* figures. Here at last the spectator, oneself, is eliminated. You are there without being there – one of the major services provided for art by its old antagonist, photography. The installation shot is a metaphor for the gallery space. In it an ideal is fulfilled as strongly as in a Salon painting of the 1830s.

Indeed, the Salon itself implicitly defines what a gallery is, a definition appropriate for the esthetics of the period. A gallery is a place with a wall, which is covered with a wall of pictures. The

wall itself has no instrinsic esthetic; it is simply a necessity for an upright animal. Samuel F. B. Morse's *Exhibition Gallery at the Louvre* (1833) is upsetting to the modern eye: masterpieces as wallpaper, each one not yet separated out and isolated in space like a throne. Disregarding the (to us) horrid concatenation of periods and styles, the demands made on the spectator by the hanging pass our understanding. Are you to hire stilts to rise to the ceiling or get on hands and knees to sniff anything below the dado? Both high and low are underprivileged areas. You overhear a lot of complaints from artists about being "skied" but nothing about being "floored." Near the floor, pictures were at least accessible and could accommodate the connoisseur's "near" look before he withdrew to a more judicious distance. One can see the nineteenth century audience strolling, peering up, sticking their faces in pictures and falling into interrogative groups a proper distance away, pointing with a cane, perambulating again, clocking off the exhibition picture by picture. Larger paintings rise to the top (easier to see from a distance) and are sometimes tilted out from the wall to maintain the viewer's plane; the "best" pictures stay in the middle zone; small pictures drop to the bottom. The perfect hanging job is an ingenious mosaic of frames without a patch of wasted wall showing.

What perceptual law could justify (to our eyes) such a barbarity? One and one only: Each picture was seen as a self-contained entity, totally isolated from its slum-close neighbor by a heavy frame around and a complete perspective system within. Space was discontinuous and categorizable, just as the houses in which these pictures hung had different rooms for different functions. The nineteenth century mind was taxonomic, and the nineteenth century eye recognized hierarchies of genre and the authority of the frame.

How did the easel picture become such a neatly wrapped parcel of space? The discovery of perspective coincides with the rise of the easel picture, and the easel picture, in turn, confirms the promise of illusionism inherent in painting. There is a peculiar relationship between a mural – painted directly on the wall – and a picture

Samuel F. B. Morse, *Exhibition Gallery at the Louvre*, 1832 - 33,
courtesy Terra Museum of American Art, Evanston, Illinois

surface, disguised as it may be with vernacular macho, dismissed as provincial impudence.

All this desperate fuss makes you realize all over again what a conservative movement Cubism was. It extended the viability of the easel picture and postponed its breakdown. Cubism was reducible to system, and systems, being easier to understand than art, dominate academic history. Systems are a kind of P.R. which, among other things, push the rather odious idea of progress. Progress can be defined as what happens when you eliminate the opposition. However, the tough opposition voice in modernism is that of Matisse, and it speaks in its unemphatic, rational way about color, which in the beginning scared Cubism gray. Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* reports on how the New York artists sweated out Cubism, while casting shrewd eyes on Matisse and Miró. Abstract Expressionist paintings followed the route of lateral expansion, dropped off the frame, and gradually began to conceive the edge as a structural unit through which the painting entered into a dialogue with the wall beyond it. At this point the dealer and curator enter from the wings. How they – in collaboration with the artist – presented these works, contributed, in the late forties and fifties, to the definition of the new painting.

Through the fifties and sixties, we notice the codification of a new theme as it evolves into consciousness: How much space should a work of art have (as the phrase went) to "breathe"? If paintings implicitly declare their own terms of occupancy, the somewhat aggrieved muttering between them becomes harder to ignore. What goes together, what doesn't? The esthetics of hanging evolves according to its own habits, which become conventions, which become laws. We enter the era where works of art conceive the wall as a no-man's land on which to project their concept of the territorial imperative. And we are not far from the kind of border warfare that often Balkanizes museum group shows. There is a peculiar uneasiness in watching artworks attempting to establish territory but not place in the context of the placeless modern gallery.

All this traffic across the wall made it a far-from-neutral zone.

Frank Stella, installation view, 1964,
courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Now a participant in, rather than a passive support for, the art, the wall became the locus of contending ideologies; and every new development had to come equipped with an attitude toward it. (Gene Davis's exhibition of micro-pictures surrounded by oodles of space is a good joke about this.) Once the wall became an esthetic force, it modified anything shown on it. The wall, the context of the art, had become rich in a content it subtly donated to the art. It is now impossible to paint up an exhibition without surveying the space like a health inspector, taking into account the esthetics of the wall which will inevitably "artify" the work in a way that frequently diffuses its intentions. Most of us now "read" the hanging as we would chew gum—unconsciously and from habit. The wall's esthetic potency received a final impetus from a realization that, in retrospect, has all the authority of historical inevitability: The easel picture didn't have to be rectangular.

Stella's early shaped canvasses bent or cut the edge according to the demands of the internal logic that generated them. (Here Michael Fried's distinction between inductive and deductive structure remains one of the few practical hand tools added to the critic's black bag.) The result powerfully activated the wall; the eye frequently went searching tangentially for the wall's limits. Stella's show of striped U-, T-, and L-shaped canvasses at Castelli in 1960 "developed" every bit of the wall, floor to ceiling, corner to corner. Flatness, edge, format, and wall had an unprecedented dialogue in that small, uptown Castelli space. As they were presented, the works hovered between an ensemble effect and independence. The hanging there was as revolutionary as the paintings; since the hanging was part of the esthetic, it evolved simultaneously with the pictures. The breaking of the rectangle formally confirmed the wall's autonomy, altering for good the concept of the gallery space. Some of the mystique of the shallow picture plane (one of the three major forces that altered the gallery space) had been transferred to the context of art.

This result brings us back again to that archetypal installation shot—the suave extensions of the space, the pristine clarity, the pictures laid out in a row like expensive bungalows. Color Field