Inside the White Cube

The Ideology of the Gallery Space

Expanded Edition

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Introduction

It has been the special genius of our century to investigate things in relation to their context, to come to see the context as formative on the thing, and, finally, to see the context as a thing itself. In this classic essay, first published as a series of three articles in *Artforum* in 1976, Brian O'Doherty discusses this turn toward context in twentieth century art. He investigates, perhaps for the first time, what the highly controlled context of the modernist gallery does to the art object, what it does to the viewing subject, and, in a crucial moment for modernism, how the context devours the object, becoming it.

In the first three sections, O'Doherty describes the modern gallery space as "constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church." The basic principle behind these laws, he notes, is that "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 art is free, as the saying used to go, 'to take on its own life.'" The purpose of such a setting is not unlike the purpose of religious buildings – the artworks, like religious verities, are to appear "untouched by time and its vicissitudes." The condition of appearing out of time, or beyond time, implies a claim that the work already belongs to posterity – that is, it is an assurance of good investment. But it does strange things to the presentness of life, which, after all, unfolds itself in time. "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."

In searching for the significance of this mode of exhibition one must look to other classes of chambers that have been constructed on similar principles. The roots of this chamber of eternal display are to be found not in the history of art so much as the history of religion, where they are in fact even more ancient than the medieval church. Egyptian tomb chambers, for example, provide an astonishingly close parallel. They too were designed to eliminate awareness of the outside world. They too were chambers where an illusion of eternal presence was to be protected from the flow of time. They too held paintings and sculptures that were regarded as magically contiguous with eternity and thus able to provide access to it or contact with it. Before the Egyptian tomb, functionally comparable spaces were the Paleolithic painted caves of the Magdalenian and Aurignacian ages in France and Spain. There, too, paintings and sculptures were found in a setting deliberately set off from the outside world and difficult of access – most of the famous cave galleries are nowhere near the entrances, and some of them require exacting climbing and spelunking to get to them.

Such ritual spaces are symbolic reestablishments of the ancient umbilicus which, in myths worldwide, once connected heaven and earth. The connection is renewed symbolically for the purposes of the tribe or, more specifically, of that caste or party in the tribe whose special interests are ritually represented. Since this is a space where access to higher metaphysical realms is made to seem available, it must be sheltered from the appearance of change and time. This specially segregated space is a kind of non-space, ultra-space, or ideal space where the surrounding matrix of space-time is symbolically annulled. In Paleolithic times the ultra-space filled with painting and sculpture seems to have served the ends of magical restitution to the biomass; afterlife beliefs and rituals may have been involved also. By Egyptian times these purposes had coalesced around the person of the Pharaoh: assurance of his afterlife through eternity was assurance of the sustenance of the state for which he stood. Behind these two purposes may be glimpsed the political interests of a class or ruling group attempting to consolidate its grip on power by seeking ratification from eternity. At one

level the process is a kind of sympathetic magic, an attempt to obtain something by ritually presenting something else that is in some way like the thing that is desired. If something like what one wants is present, the underlying reasoning implies, then what one wants may not be far behind. The construction of a supposedly unchanging space, then, or a space where the effects of change are deliberately disguised and hidden, is sympathetic magic to promote unchangingness in the real or non-ritual world; it is an attempt to cast an appearance of eternality over the status quo in terms of social values and also, in our modern instance, artistic values.

The eternity suggested in our exhibition spaces is ostensibly that of artistic posterity, of undying beauty, of the masterpiece. But in fact it is a specific sensibility, with specific limitations and conditionings, that is so glorified. By suggesting eternal ratification of a certain sensibility, the white cube suggests the eternal ratification of the claims of the caste or group sharing that sensibility. As a ritual place of meeting for members of that caste or group, it censors out the world of social variation, promoting a sense of the sole reality of its own point of view and, consequently, its endurance or eternal rightness. Seen thus, the endurance of a certain power structure is the end for which the sympathetic magic of the white cube is devised.

In the second of three sections of his essay, O'Doherty deals with the assumptions about human selfhood that are involved in the institutionalization of the white cube. "Presence before a work of art," he writes, "means that we absent ourselves in favor of the Eye and the Spectator." By the *Eye* he means the disembodied faculty that relates exclusively to formal visual means. The *Spectator* is the attenuated and bleached-out life of the self from which the Eye goes forth and which, in the meantime, does nothing else. The Eye and the Spectator are all that is left of someone who has "died," as O'Doherty puts it, by entering into the white cube. In return for the glimpse of ersatz eternity that the white cube affords us – and as a token of our solidarity with the special interests of a group – we give up our humanness and become the cardboard

Spectator with the disembodied Eye. For the sake of the intensity of the separate and autonomous activity of the Eye we accept a reduced level of life and self. In classical modernist galleries, as in churches, one does not speak in a normal voice; one does not laugh, eat, drink, lie down, or sleep; one does not get ill, go mad, sing, dance, or make love. Indeed, since the white cube promotes the myth that we are there essentially as spiritual beings – the Eye is the *Eye of the Soul* – we are to be understood as tireless and above the vicissitudes of chance and change. This slender and reduced form of life is the type of behavior traditionally required in religious sanctuaries, where what is important is the repression of individual interests in favor of the interests of the group. The essentially religious nature of the white cube is most forcefully expressed by what it does to the humanness of anyone who enters it and cooperates with its premises. On the Athenian Acropolis in Plato's day one did not eat, drink, speak, laugh, and so on.

O'Doherty brilliantly traces the development of the white cube out of the tradition of Western easel painting. He then redirects attention to the same developments from another point of view, that of the anti-formalist tradition represented here by Duchamp's installations *1,200 Coal Bags* (1938) and *Mile of String* (1942), which stepped once and for all outside the frame of the painting and made the gallery space itself the primary material to be altered by art. When O'Doherty recommends these works by Duchamp to the attention of artists of the seventies he implies that not a great deal has been achieved in the last forty or fifty years in breaking down the barriers of disinterest or disdain that separate the two traditions. Such lack of communication is impressive, since artists themselves have attempted to carry on this dialogue for a generation. Yves Klein, for example, exhibited an empty gallery called "The Void" (*Le vide*) (1958); shortly thereafter Arman responded with an exhibition called "The Full" (*Le plein*) (1960) in which he dialecticized Klein's positing of a transcendental space that is in the world but not of it by filling the same gallery from floor to ceiling and wall to wall with garbage. Michael Asher, James Lee Byars, and others have used the empty exhibition space itself as their

primary material in various works – not to mention the tradition known as Light and Space. O'Doherty discovered the way to verbalize these developments for the first time. His essay is an example of criticism attempting to digest and analyze the recent past and the present – or shall I say the recent present. He argues that the communal mind of our culture went through a significant shift that expressed itself in the prominence of the white cube as a central material and expressive mode for art, as well as a fashionable style of displaying it. He identifies the transition in question as modernism bringing "to an endpoint its relentless habit of self-definition." The defining of self means the purposeful neglect of all that is other than self. It is a process increasingly reductive that finally leaves the slate wiped clean.

The white cube was a transitional device that attempted to bleach out the past and at the same time control the future by appealing to supposedly transcendental modes of presence and power. But the problem with transcendental principles is that by definition they speak of another world, not this one. It is this other world, or access to it, that the white cube represents. It is like Plato's vision of a higher metaphysical realm where form, shiningly attenuated and abstract like mathematics, is utterly disconnected from the life of human experience here below. (Pure form would exist, Plato felt, even if this world did not.) It is little recognized how much this aspect of Platonism has to do with modernist ways of thinking, and especially as a hidden controlling structure behind modernist esthetics. Revived in part as a compensatory reaction to the decline of religion, and promoted, however mistakenly, by our culture's attention to the unchanging abstraction of mathematics, the idea of pure form dominated the esthetics (and ethics) from which the white cube emerged. The Pythagoreans of Plato's day, including Plato himself, held that the beginning was a blank where there appeared inexplicably a spot which stretched into a line, which flowed into a plane, which folded into a solid, which cast a shadow, which is what we see. This set of elements – point, line, surface, solid, simulacrum – conceived as contentless except in their own-nature, is the primary equipment of much

modern art. The white cube represents the blank ultimate face of light from which, in the Platonic myth, these elements unspeakably evolve. In such types of thought, primary shapes and geometric abstractions are regarded as alive – in fact, as more intensely alive than anything with a specific content. The white cube's ultimate meaning is this life-erasing transcendental ambition disguised and converted to specific social purposes. O'Doherty's essays in this book are defenses of the real life of the world against the sterilized operating room of the white cube – defenses of time and change against the myth of the eternality and transcendence of pure form. In fact, they embody this defense as much as they express it. They are a kind of spooky reminder of time, illustrating how quickly the newest realizations of today become the classical insights of yesterday. Though it is common to say that modernism, with its exacerbated rate of change or development, is over, that rate of change not only remains but is increasing. Articles written today will, by 1990, either have been forgotten or like these, will have become classic.

Thomas McEvilley
New York City 1986

I. Notes on the Gallery Space

A recurrent scene in sci-fi movies shows the earth withdrawing from the spacecraft until it becomes a horizon, a beachball, a grapefruit, a golf ball, a star. With the changes in scale, responses slide from the particular to the general. The individual is replaced by the race and we are a pushover for the race – a mortal biped, or tangle of them spread out below like a rug. From a certain height people are generally good. Vertical distance encourages this generosity. Horizontality doesn't seem to have the same moral virtue. Faraway figures may be approaching and we anticipate the insecurities of encounter. Life is horizontal, just one thing after another, conveyer belt shuffling us toward the horizon. But history, the view from the departing spacecraft, is different. As the scale changes, layers of time are superimposed and through them we project perspectives with which to recover and correct the past. No wonder art gets bollixed up in this process; its history, perceived through time, is confounded by the picture in front of your eyes, a witness ready to change testimony at the slightest perceptual provocation. History and the eye have a profound wrangle at the center of this "constant" we call tradition.

All of us are now sure that the glut of history, rumor, and evidence we call the modernist tradition is being circumscribed by a horizon. Looking down, we see more clearly its "laws" of progress, its armature hammered out of idealist philosophy, its military metaphors of advance and conquest. What a sight it is – or was! Deployed ideologies, transcendent rockets, romantic slums where degradation and idealism obsessively couple, all those troops run-

ning back and forth in conventional wars. The campaign reports that end up pressed between boards on coffee tables give us little idea of the actual heroics. Those paradoxical achievements huddle down there, awaiting the revisions that will add the avant-garde era to tradition, or, as we sometimes fear, end it. Indeed, tradition itself, as the spacecraft withdraws, looks like another piece of bric-a-brac on the coffee table – no more than a kinetic assemblage glued together with reproductions, powered by little mythic motors and sporting tiny models of museums. And in its midst, one notices an evenly lighted "cell" that appears crucial to making the thing work: the gallery space.

The history of modernism is intimately framed by that space; or rather the history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space and in the way we see it. We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the *space* first. (A cliché of the age is to ejaculate over the space on entering a gallery.) An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of twentieth century art; it clarifies itself through a process of historical inevitability usually attached to the art it contains.

The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art." The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics. So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber that, once outside it, art can lapse into secular status. Conversely, things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them. Indeed, the object frequently becomes the medium through which these ideas are manifested and proffered for discussion – a popular form of late modernist academicism ("ideas are more interesting than art"). The sacramental nature of the space becomes clear, and so does one of the great projective laws of modernism:

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

A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for build ing 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 discree 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.

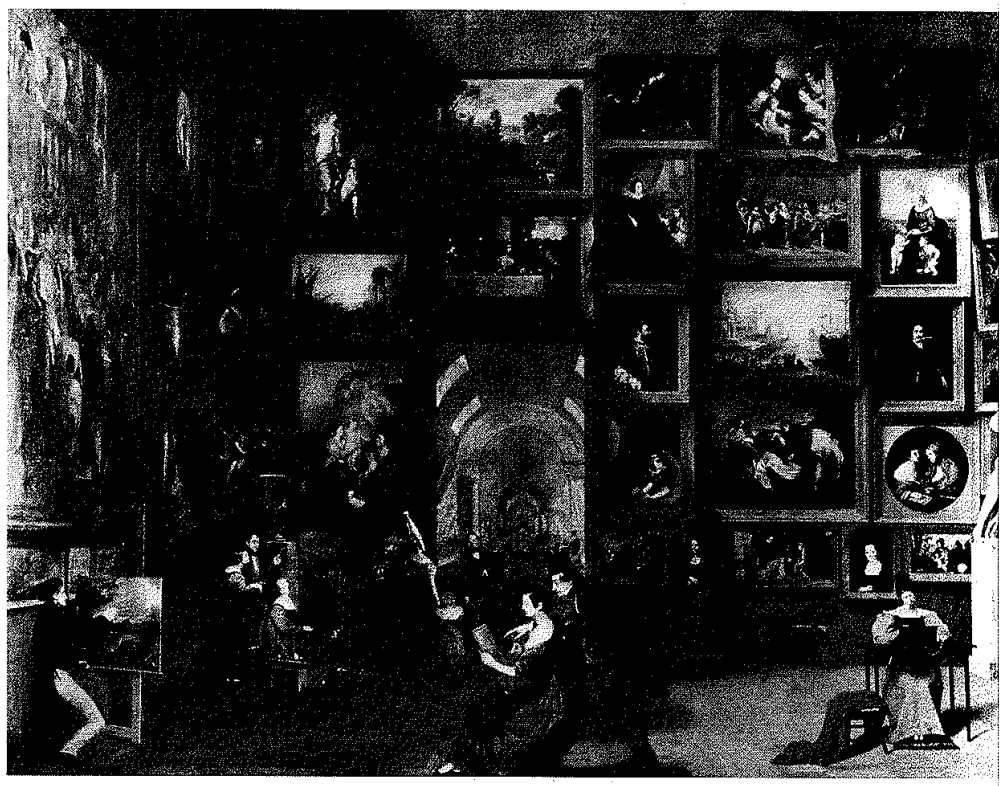
Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial – the space is devoted to th technology of esthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of "period' (late modern), 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 mannequins 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 in 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 intrinsic 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.

that hangs on a wall; a painted wall is replaced by a piece of portable wall. Limits are established and framed; miniaturization becomes a powerful convention that assists rather than contradicts illusion. The space in murals tends to be shallow; even when illusion is an intrinsic part of the idea, the integrity of the wall is as often reinforced, by struts of painted architecture, as denied. The wall itself is always recognized as limiting depth (you don't walk through it), just as corners and ceilings (often in a variety of inventive ways) limit size. Close up, murals tend to be frank about their means – illusionism breaks down in a babble of method. You feel you are looking at the underpainting and often can't quite find your "place." Indeed, murals project ambiguous and wandering vectors with which the spectator attempts to align himself. The easel picture on the wall quickly indicates to him exactly where he stands.

For the easel picture is like a portable window that, once set on the wall, penetrates it with deep space. This theme is endlessly repeated in northern art, where a window within the picture in turn frames not only a further distance but confirms the window-like limits of the frame. The magical, boxlike status of some smaller easel pictures is due to the immense distances they contain and the perfect details they sustain on close examination. The frame of the easel picture is as much a psychological container for the artist as the room in which the viewer stands is for him or her. The perspective positions everything within the picture along a cone of space, against which the frame acts like a grid, echoing those cuts of foreground, middleground, and distance within. One "steps" firmly into such a picture or glides effortlessly, depending on its tonality and color. The greater the illusion, the greater the invitation to the spectator's eye. The eye is abstracted from an anchored body and projected as a miniature proxy into the picture to inhabit and test the articulations of its space.

For this process, the stability of the frame is as necessary as an oxygen tank is to a diver. Its limiting security completely defines the experience within. The border as absolute limit is confirmed in easel art up to the nineteenth century. Where it curtails or elides

subject matter, it does so in a way that strengthens the edge. The classic package of perspective enclosed by the Beaux-Arts frame makes it possible for pictures to hang like sardines. There is no suggestion that the space within the picture is continuous with the space on either side of it.

This suggestion is made only sporadically through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as atmosphere and color eat awa at the perspective. Landscape is the progenitor of a translucent mist that puts perspective and tone/color in opposition, because implicit in each are opposite interpretations of the wall they hang on. Pictures begin to appear that put pressure on the frame. The archetypal composition here is the edge-to-edge horizon, separating zones of sky and sea, often underlined by beach, with maybe a figure facing, as everyone does, the sea. Formal composition is gone; the frames within the frame (*coulisses, repoussoirs,* the Braille of perspective depth) have slid away. What is left is an ambiguous surface partly framed from the inside by the horizon. Such picture (by Courbet, Caspar David Friedrich, Whistler, and hosts of little masters) are posed between infinite depth and flatness and tend to read as pattern. The powerful convention of the horizon zips easily enough through the limits of the frame.

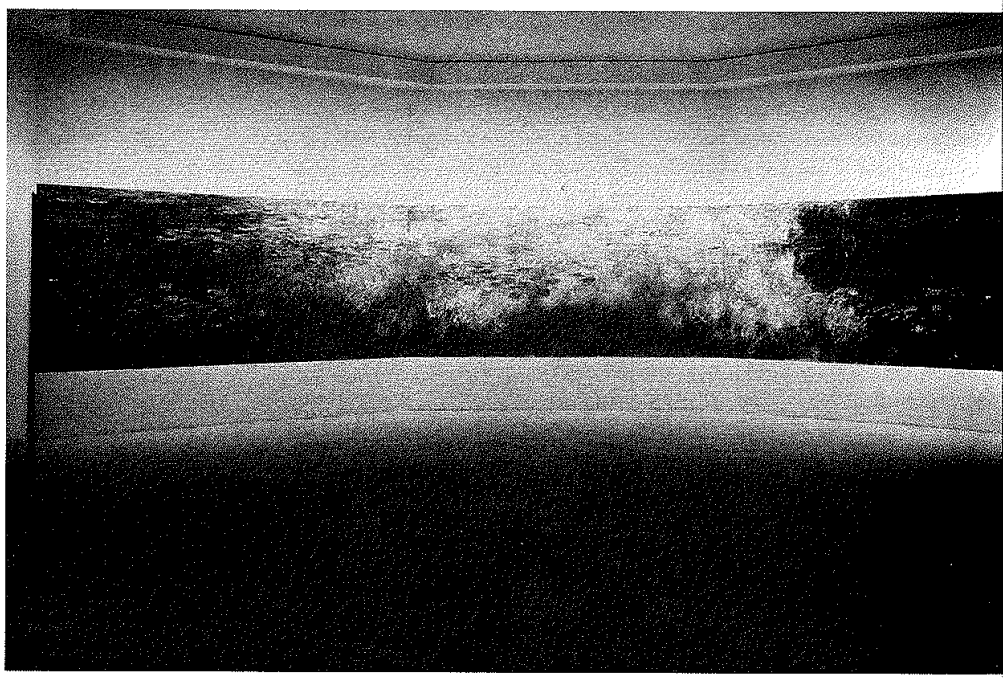
These and certain pictures focusing on an indeterminate patch of landscape that often looks like the "wrong" subject introduce the idea of *noticing* something, of an eye scanning. This temporal quickening makes the frame an equivocal, and not an absolute, zone. Once you know that a patch of landscape represents a decision to exclude everything around it, you are faintly aware of the space outside the picture. The frame becomes a parenthesis. The separation of paintings along a wall, through a kind of magnetic repulsion, becomes inevitable. And it was accentuated and largely initiated by the new science – or art – devoted to the excision of a subject from its context: photography.

In a photograph, the location of the edge is a primary decision, since it composes – or decomposes – what it surrounds. Eventuall framing, editing, cropping – establishing limits – become major acts of composition. But not so much in the beginning. There was

the usual holdover of pictorial conventions to do some of the work of framing – internal buttresses made up of convenient trees and knolls. The best early photographs reinterpret the edge without the assistance of pictorial conventions. They *lower* the tension on the edge by allowing the subject matter to compose itself, rather than consciously aligning it with the edge. Perhaps this is typical of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century looked at a subject – not at its edges. Various fields were studied within their declared limits. Studying not the field but its limits, and defining these limits for the purpose of extending them, is a twentieth century habit. We have the illusion that we add to a field by extending it laterally, not by going, as the nineteenth century might say in proper perspective style, deeper into it. Even scholarship in both centuries has a recognizably different sense of edge and depth, of limits and definition. Photography quickly learned to move away from heavy frames and to mount a print on a sheet of board. A frame was allowed to surround the board after a neutral interval. Early photography recognized the edge but removed its rhetoric, softened its absolutism, and turned it into a zone rather than the strut it later became. One way or another, the edge as a firm convention locking in the subject had become fragile.

Much of this applied to Impressionism, in which a major theme was the edge as umpire of what's in and what's out. But this was combined with a far more important force, the beginning of the decisive thrust that eventually altered the idea of the picture, the way it was hung, and ultimately the gallery space: the myth of flatness, which became the powerful logician in painting's argument for self-definition. The development of a shallow literal space (containing invented forms, as distinct from the old illusory space containing "real" forms) put further pressures on the edge. The great inventor here is, of course, Monet.

Indeed, the magnitude of the revolution he initiated is such that there is some doubt his achievement matches it; for he is an artist of decided limitations (or one who decided on his limitations and stayed within them). Monet's landscapes often seem to have been noticed on his way to or from the real subject. There is an impres-



Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*, 1920, triptych: each panel 6'6" x 14',
courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York,
Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund

sion that he is settling for a provisional solution; the very featurelessness relaxes your eye to look elsewhere. The informal subject matter of Impressionism is always pointed out, but not that the subject is seen through a casual glance, one not too interested in what it's looking at. What is interesting in Monet is "looking at" this look – the integument of light, the often preposterous formularization of a perception through a punctate code of color and touch which remains (until near the end) impersonal. The edge eclipsing the subject seems a somewhat haphazard decision that could just as well have been made a few feet left or right. A signature of Impressionism is the way the casually chosen subject softens the edge's structural role at a time when the edge is under pressure from the increasing shallowness of the space. This doubled and somewhat opposing stress on the edge is the prelude to the definition of a painting as a self-sufficient object – a container of illusory fact now become the primary fact itself – which sets us on the high road to some stirring esthetic climaxes.

Flatness and objecthood usually find their first official text in Maurice Denis' famous statement in 1890 that before a picture is subject matter, it is first of all a surface covered with lines and colors. This is one of those literalisms that sounds brilliant or rather dumb, depending on the *Zeitgeist*. Right now, having seen the endpoint to which nonmetaphor, nonstructure, nonillusion and noncontent can take you, the *Zeitgeist* makes it sound a little obtuse. That picture plane – the ever-thinning integument of modernist integrity – sometimes seems ready for Woody Allen and has indeed attracted its share of ironists and wits. But this ignores that the powerful myth of the picture plane received its impetus from the centuries during which it sealed in unalterable systems of illusion. Conceiving it differently in the modern era was an heroic adjustment that signified a totally different world view, which was trivialized into esthetics, into the technology of flatness.

The literalization of the picture plane is a great subject. As the vessel of content becomes shallower and shallower, composition and subject matter and metaphysics all overflow across the edge until, as Gertrude Stein said about Picasso, the emptying out is

complete. But all the jettisoned apparatus – hierarchies of painting illusion, locatable space, mythologies beyond number – bounded back in disguise and attached themselves, via new mythologies, to the literal surfaces, which had apparently left them no purchase. The transformation of literary myths into literal myths – objecthood, the integrity of the picture plane, the equalization of space, the self-sufficiency of the work, the purity of form – is unexplored territory. Without this change, art would have been obsolete. Indeed, its changes often seem one step ahead of obsolescence, and to that degree its progress mimics the laws of fashion.

The cultivation of the picture plane resulted in an entity with length and breadth but no thickness, a membrane which, in a metaphor usually organic, could generate its own self-sufficient laws. The primary law, of course, was that this surface, pressed between huge historical forces, could not be violated. A narrow space forced to represent without representing, to symbolize without benefit of received conventions, generated a plethora of new conventions without a consensus – color codes, signatures of paint, private signs, intellectually formulated ideas of structure. Cubism's concepts of structure conserved the easel painting status quo; Cubist paintings are centripetal, gathered toward the center, fading out toward the edge. (Is this why Cubist paintings tend to be small?) Seurat understood much better how to define the limits of a classic formulation at a time when edges had become equivocal. Frequently, painted borders made up of a glomeration of colored dots are deployed inward to separate out and describe the subject. The border absorbs the slow movements of the structure within. To muffle the abruptness of the edge, he sometimes pattered all over the frame so that the eye could move out of the picture – and back into it – without a bump.

Matisse understood the dilemma of the picture plane and its tropism toward outward extension better than anyone. His pictures grew bigger as if, in a topological paradox, depth were being translated into a flat analog. On this, place was signified by up and down and left and right, by color, by drawing that rarely closed a contour without calling on the surface to contradict it, and by

paint applied with a kind of cheerful impartiality to every part of that surface. In Matisse's large paintings we are hardly ever conscious of the frame. He solved the problem of lateral extension and containment with perfect tact. He doesn't emphasize the center at the expense of the edge, or vice versa. His pictures don't make arrogant claims to stretches of bare wall. They look good almost anywhere. Their tough, informal structure is combined with a decorative prudence that makes them remarkably self-sufficient. They are easy to hang.

Hanging, indeed, is what we need to know more about. From Courbet on, conventions of hanging are an unrecovered history. The way pictures are hung makes assumptions about what is offered. Hanging editorializes on matters of interpretation and value, and is unconsciously influenced by taste and fashion. Subliminal cues indicate to the audience its deportment. It should be possible to correlate the internal history of paintings with the external history of how they were hung. We might begin our search not with a mode of display communally sanctioned (like the Salon), but with the vagaries of private insight – with those pictures of seventeenth and eighteenth century collectors elegantly sprawled in the midst of their inventory. The first modern occasion, I suppose, in which a radical artist set up his own space and hung his pictures in it was Courbet's one-man *Salon des Refusés* outside the Exposition of 1855. How were the pictures hung? How did Courbet construe their sequence, their relationship to each other, the spaces between? I suspect he did nothing startling; yet it was the first time a modern artist (who happened to be the first modern artist) had to construct the context of his work and therefore editorialize about its values.

Though pictures may have been radical, their early framing and hanging usually was not. The interpretation of what a picture implies about its context is always, we may assume, delayed. In their first exhibition in 1874, the Impressionists stuck their pictures cheek by jowl, just as they would have hung in the Salon. Impressionist pictures, which assert their flatness and their doubts about the limiting edge, are still sealed off in Beaux-Arts frames that do

little more than announce "Old Master" – and monetary – status. When William C. Seitz took off the frames for his great Monet show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1960, the undressed canvasses looked a bit like reproductions until you saw how they began to hold the wall. Though the hanging had its eccentric moments, it read the pictures' relation to the wall correctly and, in a rare act of curatorial daring, followed up the implications. Seitz also set some of the Monets flush with the wall. Continuous with the wall, the pictures took on some of the rigidity of tiny murals. The surfaces turned hard as the picture plane was "over-literalized." The difference between the easel picture and the mural was clarified.

The relation between the picture plane and the underlying wall is very pertinent to the esthetics of surface. The inch of the stretcher's width amounts to a formal abyss. The easel painting is not transferable to the wall, and one wants to know why. What is lost in the transfer? Edges, surface, the grain and bite of the canvas, the separation from the wall. Nor can we forget that the whole thing is suspended or supported – transferable, mobile currency. After centuries of illusionism, it seems reasonable to suggest that these parameters, no matter how flat the surface, are the loci of the last traces of illusionism. Mainstream painting right up to Color Field is easel painting, and its literalism is practiced against these desiderata of illusionism. Indeed, these traces make literalism interesting; they are the hidden component of the dialectical engine that gave the late modernist easel picture its energy. If you copied a late modernist easel picture onto the wall and then hung the easel picture beside it, you could estimate the degree of illusionism that turned up in the faultless literal pedigree of the easel picture. At the same time, the rigid mural would underline the importance of surface and edges to the easel picture, now beginning to hover close to an objecthood defined by the "literal" remnants of illusion – an unstable area.

The attacks on painting in the sixties failed to specify that it wasn't painting but the easel picture that was in trouble. Color Field painting was thus conservative in an interesting way, but not

to those who recognized that the easel picture couldn't rid itself of illusion and who rejected the premise of something lying quietly on the wall and behaving itself. I've always been surprised that Color Field – or late modernist painting in general – didn't try to get onto the wall, didn't attempt a rapprochement between the mural and the easel picture. But then Color Field painting conformed to the social context in a somewhat disturbing way. It remained Salon painting: it needed big walls and big collectors and couldn't avoid looking like the ultimate in capitalist art. Minimal art recognized the illusions inherent in the easel picture and didn't have any illusions about society. It didn't ally itself with wealth and power, and its abortive attempt to redefine the relation of the artist to various establishments remains largely unexplored.

Apart from Color Field, late modernist painting postulated some ingenious hypotheses on how to squeeze a little extra out of that recalcitrant picture plane, now so dumbly literal it could drive you crazy. The strategy here was simile (pretending), not metaphor (believing): saying the picture plane is "like a _____." The blank was filled in by flat things that lie obligingly on the literal surface and fuse with it, e.g., Johns' *Flags*, Cy Twombly's blackboard paintings, Alex Hay's huge painted "sheets" of lined paper, Arakawa's "notebooks." Then there is the "like a window shade," "like a wall," "like a sky" area. There's a good comedy-of-manners piece to be written about the "like a _____" solution to the picture plane. There are numerous related areas, including the perspective schema resolutely flattened into two dimensions to quote the picture plane's dilemma. And before leaving this area of rather desperate wit, one should note the solutions that cut through the picture plane (Lucio Fontana's answer to the Gordian surface) until the picture is taken away and the wall's plaster attacked directly.

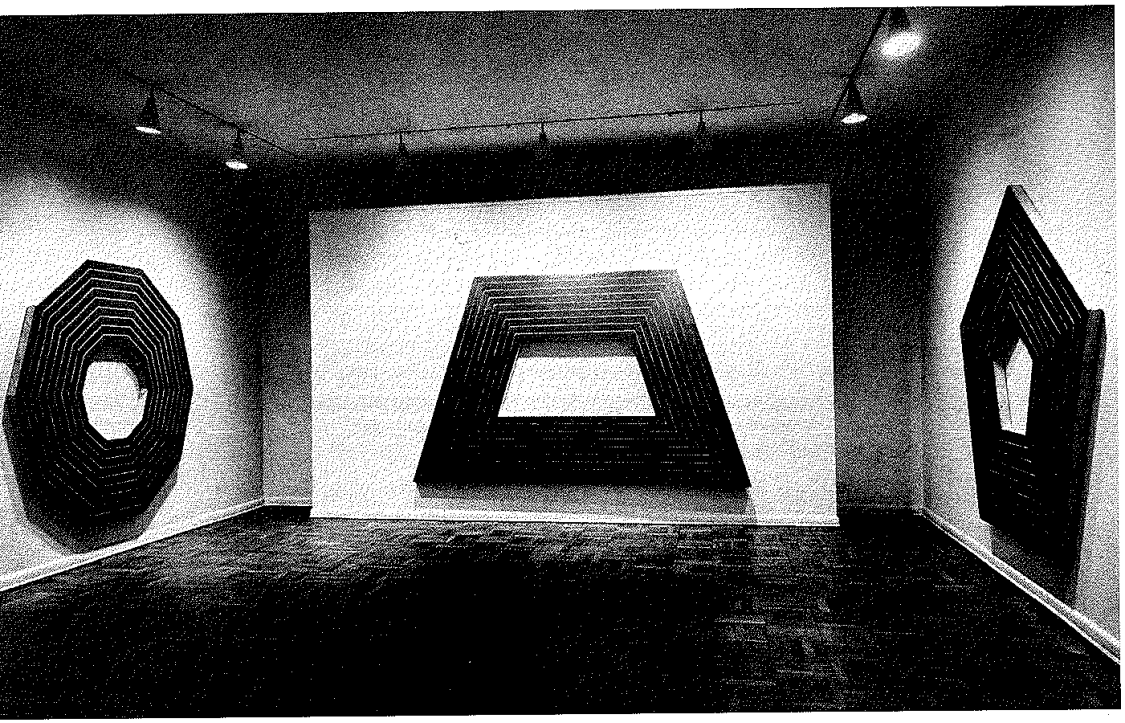
Also related is the solution that lifts surface and edges off that Procrustean stretcher and pins, sticks, or drapes paper, fiberglass, or cloth directly against the wall to literalize even further. Here a lot of Los Angeles painting falls neatly – for the first time! – into the historical mainstream; it's a little odd to see this obsession with

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.

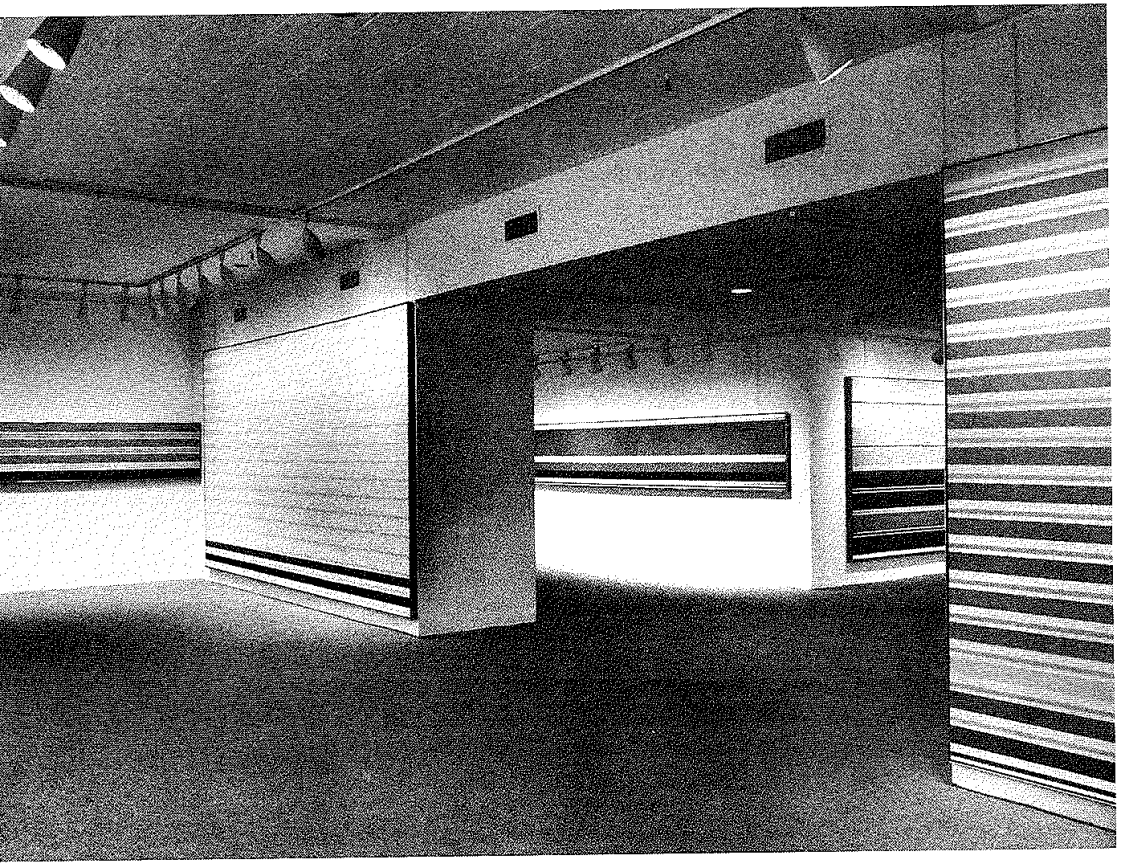


Frank Stella, installation view, 1964,
courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

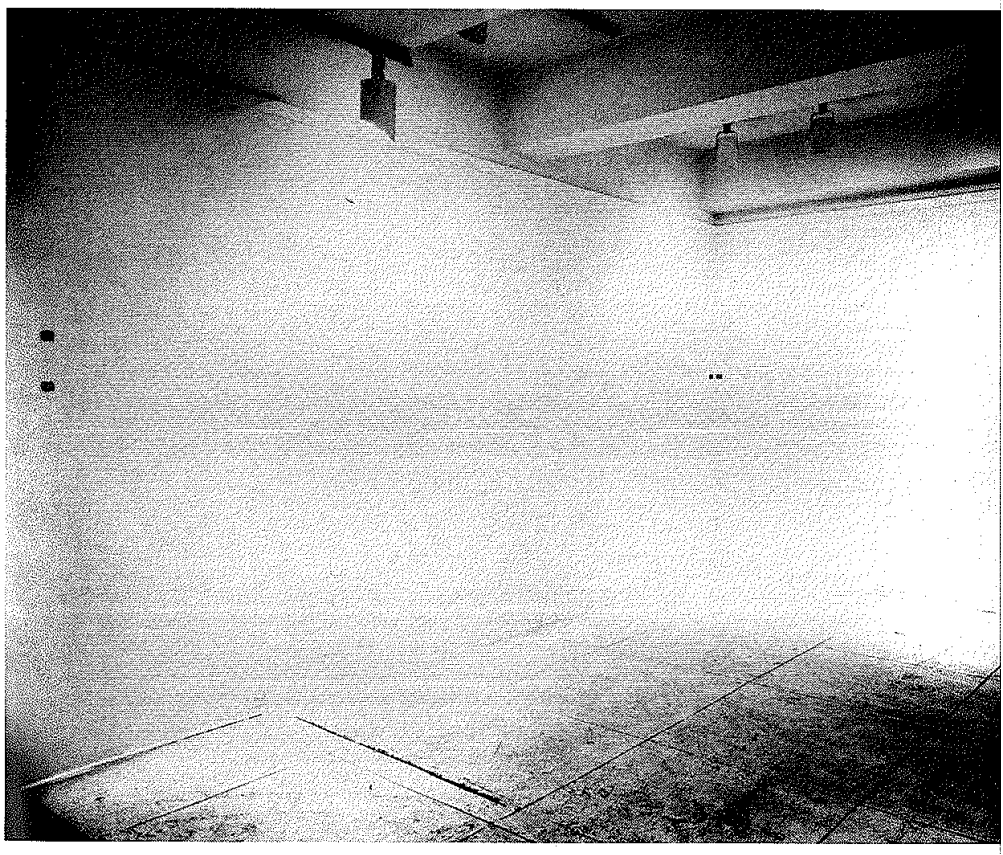
Now a participant in, rather than a passive support for the art, the wall became the locus of contending ideologies; and every new development had to come equipped with an attitude toward it. (Gene Davis' exhibition of micro-pictures surrounded by oodles of space is a good joke about this.) Once the wall became an esthetic force, it modified anything shown on it. The wall, the contex 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.

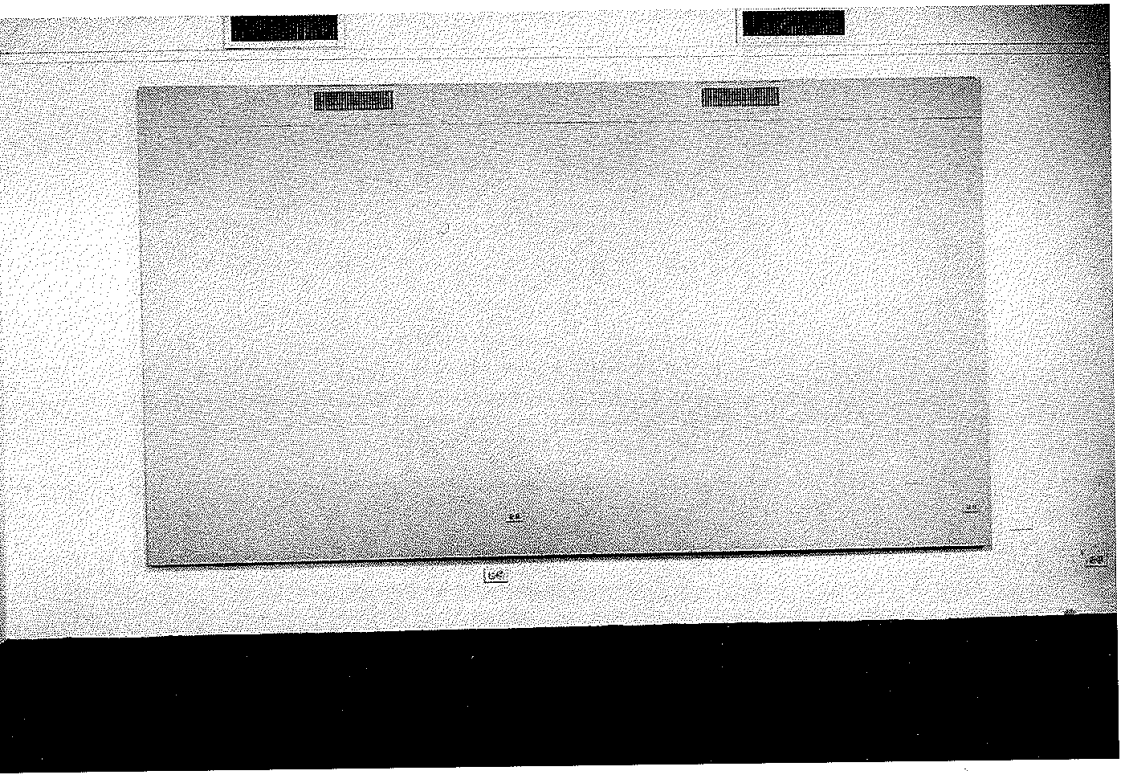
This result brings us back again to that archetypal installation shot – the suave extensions of the space, the pristine clarity, the pictures laid out in a row like expensive bungalows. Color Field



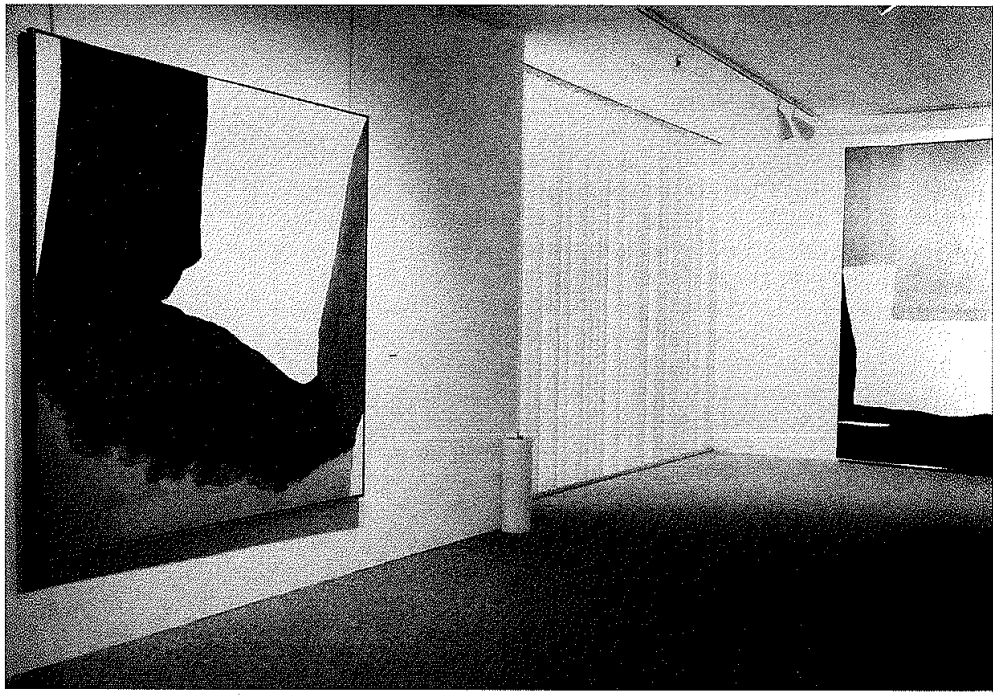
Kenneth Noland, installation view, 1967,
courtesy André Emmerich Gallery, New York



Gene Davis, installation view, 1968, courtesy Fischbach Gallery,
New York (photo: John A. Ferrari)



William Anastasi, *West Wall, Dwan Main Gallery*, 1967
(photo: Walter Russell)



Helen Frankenthaler, installation view, 1968,
courtesy André Emmerich Gallery

painting, which inevitably comes to mind here, is the most imperial of modes in its demand for *lebensraum*. The pictures recur as reassuringly as the columns in a classic temple. Each demands enough space so that its effect is over before its neighbor's picks up. Otherwise, the pictures would be a single perceptual field, frank ensemble painting, detracting from the uniqueness claimed by each canvas. The Color Field installation shot should be recognized as one of the teleological endpoints of the modern tradition. There is something splendidly luxurious about the way the pictures and the gallery reside in a context that is fully sanctioned socially. We are aware we are witnessing a triumph of high seriousness and hand-tooled production, like a Rolls Royce in a showroom that began as a Cubist jalopy in an outhouse.

What comment can you make on this? A comment has been made already, in an exhibition by William Anastasi at Dwan in New York in 1965. He photographed the empty gallery at Dwan, noticed the parameters of the wall, top and bottom, right and left, the placement of each electrical outlet, the ocean of space in the middle. He then silkscreened all this data on a canvas slightly smaller than the wall and put it on the wall. Covering the wall with an image of that wall delivers a work of art right into the zone where surface, mural, and wall have engaged in dialogues central to modernism. In fact, this history was the theme of these paintings, a theme stated with a wit and cogency usually absent from our written clarifications. For me, at least, the show had a peculiar after-effect; when the paintings came down, the wall became a kind of ready-made mural and so changed every show in that space thereafter.

II. The Eye and the Spectator

Couldn't modernism be taught to children as a series of Aesop's fables? It would be more memorable than art appreciation. Think of such fables as "Who Killed Illusion" or "How the Edge Revolted Against the Center." "The Man Who Violated the Canvas" could follow "Where Did the Frame Go?" It would be easy to draw morals: think of "The Vanishing Impasto That Soaked Away – and Then Came Back and Got Fat." And how would we tell the story of the little Picture Plane that grew up and got so mean? How it evicted everybody, including Father Perspective and Mother Space, who had raised such nice real children, and left behind only this horrid result of an incestuous affair called Abstraction, who looked down on everybody, including – eventually – its buddies, Metaphor and Ambiguity; and how Abstraction and the Picture Plane, thick as thieves, kept booting out a persistent guttersnipe named Collage, who just wouldn't give up. Fables give you more latitude than art history. I suspect art historians have fantasies about their fields they would like to make stick. This is a preface to some generalizations about Cubism and collage that seem equally true and fictitious, and thus compose a fairy tale for adults.

The forces that crushed four hundred years of illusionism and idealism together and evicted them from the picture translated deep space into surface tension. This surface responds as a field to any mark on it. One mark was enough to establish a relationship not so much with the next as with the esthetic and ideological potency of the blank canvas. The content of the empty canvas increased as modernism went on. Imagine a museum of such potencies, a temporal corridor hung with blank canvasses – from 1850, 1880, 1910, 1950, 1970. Each contains, before a brush is laid on it, assumptions implicit in the art of its era. As the series approaches the present, each member accumulates a more com-