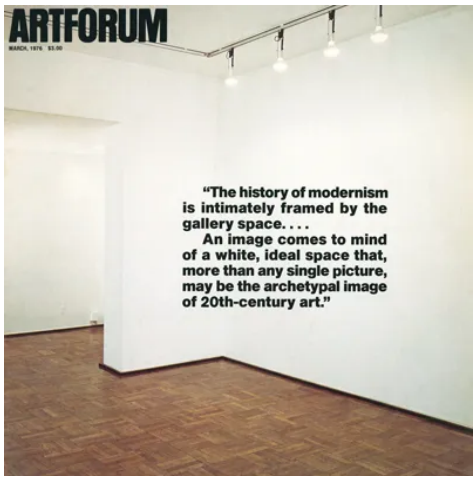
INSIDE THE WHITE CUBE: NOTES ON THE GALLERY SPACE, PART I

By Brian O'Doherty

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 a 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. Far away figures may be approaching and we anticipate the insecurities of encounter. Life is horizontal, just one thing after another, a 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



Gail Stern and Robert Mates

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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 running 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.

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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 20th-century art. And 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—and 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 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 mannequins for further study. This Descartian 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 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 to get on hands and knees to sniff anything below the dado? Both high and low are underprivileged areas. You overheard 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 19th-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 such (to our eyes) a barbarity? One and one only. That 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 19th-century mind was taxonomic, and the 19th-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, confirmed the promise of illusionism inherent in painting. There is a peculiar relation between a mural—painted directly on the wall—and a picture 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 roof (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 windowlike 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 he stands is for the viewer. 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, middle ground and distance within. One "steps" firmly into such a picture, or glides in 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 to a diver. Its limiting security completely defines the experience within. The border as absolute limit is confirmed in easel art up to the 19th century. When 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 outside it.

This suggestion is made only sporadically through the 18th and 19th centuries as atmosphere and color eat away at the perspective. Landscape is the progenitor of a translucent mist that puts perspective and tone/color in opposition, because both contain, among other things, 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 occasionally 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 pictures (by Courbet, Caspar David Friedrich, Whistler and hosts of little masters) are poised 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 is 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. Eventually 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. But 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 19th century. The 19th 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 20th-century habit. We have the illusion that we add to a field by extending it laterally, not by going, as the 19th 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. But one way or another, the edge as a firm convention locking in the subject had become fragile.

Much of this applied to Impressionism, where a major theme is the edge as umpire of what's in and what's out. But this is 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 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 impression 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 to 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, when we've seen the end-point to which nonmetaphor, nonstructure, nonillusion and noncontent can take you, the *zeitgeist* makes it sound a little obtuse. The 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—bounced back in disguise and attached themselves, via new mythologies, to the literal surface 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 obsolesence, 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 make 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 17th-and 18th-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 be radical, their early framing and hanging usually is 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 canvases 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 "overliteralized." 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 '60s 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's *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 (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 Procrustian 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 because of geographical misplacement as provincial impudence.

All this desperate fuss makes you realize 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 Matissé 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 '40s and '50s, to the definition of the new painting.

Through the '50s and '60s, 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. 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 walls' 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 canvases 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 of 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 canvases 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 here 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 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 end-points 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.

Brian O'Doherty shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery under the name of Patrick Ireland.

Samuel F.B. Morse, *Exhibition Gallery at the Louvre*, 1832–33, oil, 76" × 106½". (Syracuse University.)

INSIDE THE WHITE CUBE: NOTES ON THE GALLERY SPACE

Part I

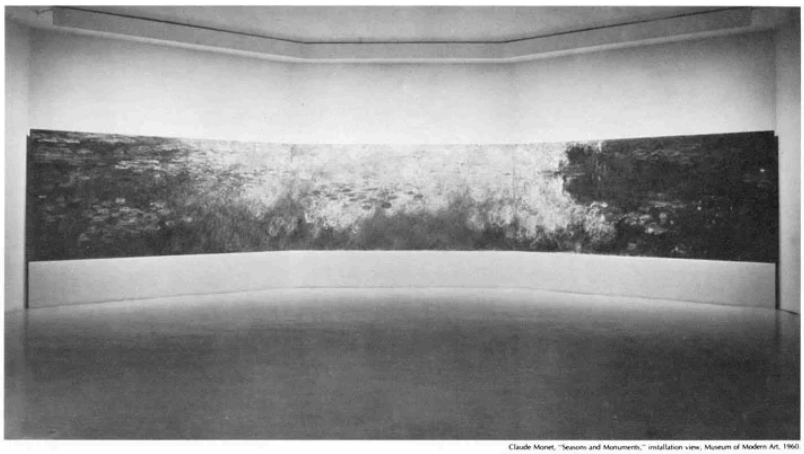
BRIAN O'DOHERTY

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 a 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. Far away figures may be approaching and we anticipate the insecurities of encounter. Life is horizontal, just one thing after another, a 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 running 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 20th-century art. And 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—and 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



Claude Monet, "Seasons and Monuments," installation view, Museum of Modern Art, 1960.

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 gallery and its laws.

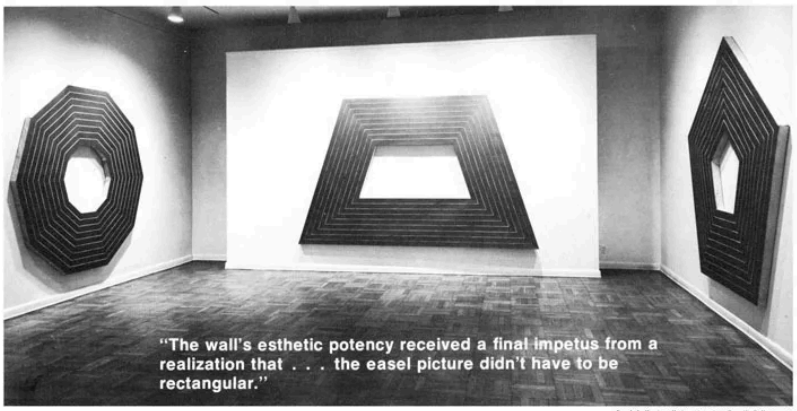
A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically or carpeted 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 Descartian 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 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 to get on hands and knees to sniff anything below the dado? Both high and low are underprivileged areas. You overheard 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 19th-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 such (to our eyes) a barbarity? One and one only. That 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 19th-century mind was taxonomic, and the 19th-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, confirmed the promise of illusionism inherent in painting. There is a peculiar relation between a mural—painted directly on the wall—and a picture that hangs on a wall; a painted wall is replaced by a piece of portable wall. Limits are established and framed; miniaturization becomes a



Frank Stella, installation view, Leo Castelli Gallery, 1964.

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 roof (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.

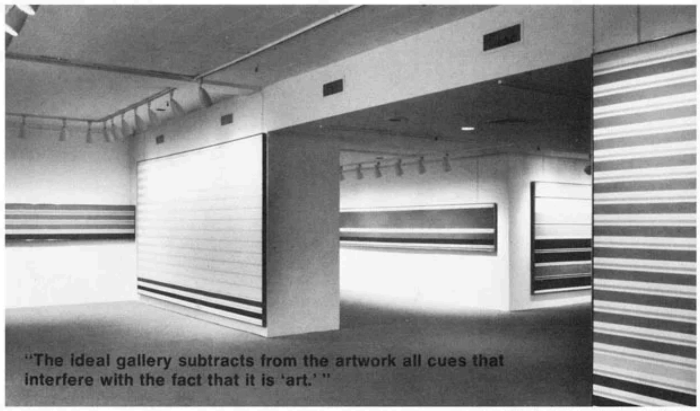
For the easel picture is like a portable window that, once set on the wall, penetrates it with deep space. This theme is endlessly repeated in northern art, where a window within the picture in turn frames not only a further distance but confirms the windowlike limits of the frame. The magical, boxlike 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 he stands is tor the viewer. 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 in 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 to a diver. Its limiting security completely defines the experience within. The border as absolute limit is confirmed in easel art up to the 19th century. When 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 outside it.

This suggestion is made only sporadically through the 18th and 19th centuries as atmosphere and color eat away at the perspective. Landscape is the progenitor of a translucent mist that puts perspective and tone/color in opposition, because both contain, among other things, 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 occasionally 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 pictures (by Courbet, Caspar David Friedrich, Whistler and hosts of little masters) are poised 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 is 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. Eventually 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. But 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 19th century. The 19th 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



Kenneth Noland, installation view, Andre Emmerich Gallery, 1967.

extending them, is a 20th-century habit. We have the illusion that we add to a field by extending it laterally, not by going, as the 19th 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. But one way or another, the edge as a firm convention locking in the subject had become fragile.

Much of this applied to Impressionism, where a major theme is the edge as umpire of what's in and what's out. But this is 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 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 impression 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 to 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, when we've seen the end-point to which nonmetaphor, nonstructure, nonillusion and noncontent can take you, the *zeitgeist* makes it sound a little obtuse. The 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—bounced back in disguise and attached themselves, via new mythologies, to the literal surface 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 obsolesence, 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

Gene Davis, installation view, Fischbach Gallery, 1968.

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 make 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 17th- and 18th-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 be radical, their early framing and hanging usually is 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 canvases 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