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MAKING AND ITS COMPANIONS IN THE VISUAL ARTS

By

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INTRODUCTION: SOME GROUNDWORK.

The stretched canvas supported by a rectangular wooden armature is only one of the conventional formats of Western painting. Pottery, plaster walls, the leaves of books, panes of glass set in real windows, and "panels"—those portable solid chunks of woodwork plastered over (like little slices of wall)—all presented themselves to painting long before the light, resilient, easily transportable (and saleable) canvas as we know it settled in.

Modernism's most taxing challenge is to determine the limits of painting interchange with sculpture—either to accept the recurrent collapse of these two classes into one or two assert their profound separation.  

It may be tautological to point out that making is the central issue to what we perceive as being art. To fully understand the significance art has to the people who make it as well as those who view it we must "dissect" it, simplify it. We should adopt first a severely reductive attitude and then build upon that. It seems a general rule in modernist art that as a style progresses, its practitioners gradually assume a reductivist attitude. Therefore, to understand art, its process and materials, we should perhaps begin


with a reductive attitude. Examine the making of art as behavior and the manipulation of matter rather than as an illustration of concept. To separate mind and body or brain and motor activity in the act of making art is a mistake. It is the same as the separation of artist and craftsman and one that both the artist and craftsman seem far too willing to accept without careful examination of what that separation suggests.

It is for this reason that I feel slightly uncomfortable when confronted with separations such as Painter, and Sculptor, or Art and Craft and the numerous additional separations that occur within these categories. It seems that these titles do not so much indicate a particular expertise of an individual but rather an ignorance of the other expertises and more importantly an avoidance of the basic issue, the development of a culture.

Though it might appear so at times, I do not believe that there is any "progress" in Art. I do not think for a moment that the achievements in the arts in, for instance, the last decade, are any more advanced than the achievements of a hundred years ago. I do believe though that Art learns from itself as does science and many things accomplished recently would not have been done without
historical precedent. In the long run the objectives of Art remain the same and no one achievement outweighs another, given a total picture.

Though I do not wish to write specifically about my own art work in this paper, I am very deeply involved with the issues that I will discuss and attempt to clarify. A certain degree of subjectivity is unavoidable, yet the issues themselves are universal. I will be dealing mostly with ideas related to art and the art object generally, but will also be referring on occasion to the discipline of Painting. I am concerned with the issues of making and the properties and manipulation of matter as idea. Regardless of how important I feel a third dimension is to an art work I remain basically a two-dimensionally oriented artist. The third dimension is always approached through the concept of "painting".

I will conclude these introductory remarks with a slightly cynical definition of painting that I developed. It ties in I believe with the opening quotes I have used and attempts to combat the mindlessness with which many artists follow a particular concept of tradition.
The definition breaks the painter's process into a formula starting with a wall on which a painting might hang and moving outward. My intention for this exercise is not a condemnation but an examination of the artist's or painter's product. My intention is to raise the question, "why".

Definition of Painting:

A) Architectural Support.

B) 1st Support: scale, shape, length, width, depth or degree of relief from A.

C) 2nd Support: conceals the character of B. At the same time reaffirms its existence and strength. Rigidity of B controls "pull" of C.

D) Image: the application thereof is awkward, regardless of its nature. Tends to ignore the existence of B and C.
ON MAKING AND DOING

Doing is the progress of an idea. Making is the suspension of an idea. Making means individualism. Doing means anonymity. Making means product, the manipulation of materials and ideas into a synthesis of idea, action and material. Doing means idea and action only. In doing a work of Art, what is most important is a sequence of information. In making a work of Art, the collective presence of the piece is of most importance.

In the book 11 Excerpts (1967-1976), Mel Bochner makes the statement "I do not make art. I do Art." In an interview with Ellen H. Johnson in 1972, Bochner stated: "I don't want the responsibility for the existence of things. Carrying that a little bit farther, I don't want to have the responsibility for pieces of furniture which would be the works of art that I had made."

It seems from Bochner's statements that when he speaks of an interest in doing, it is in other words an interest in relationships that exist only in the mind, relationships that might exist for many people in the same way. Making offers something different, that is more personal, and
that changes with time. My perception of something that is made might change and grow daily as I can never be sure of what the nature of that object is. My perception of something that is done is static, for what is more important is the idea and memory and not the residue.

A basic conclusion could be that when we are making, we are also doing. When we are doing, the making is optional. In doing a work of Art, when the making is optional the manipulation of material is at a minimum. What is more important is the material itself. When an art work is "done," of course it is done by a person, which means it is also made. But when the manipulation of material is at a minimum and that manipulation does not transform the material into any kind of object, or the material retains its own basic form and characteristics, this constitutes "doing."

What seems to be the basic difference between these two actions in relation to Art is the degree of involvement the body has with the material. If I take one hundred pounds of concrete and pour it into a pile, I am doing. If I take that same material and shape it into a cube I am making.
Making is the direct result of the behavior of an individual, a particular way he or she deals with the surrounding environment. It is a stimulus-response action that involves the mind and body simultaneously. A behaviorist does not recognize the existence of a mental space in which the world is taken in and digested. The behaviorist believes that the world remains outside the body and reaction to it is not the result of an earlier mental picture but of a response involving the whole being. The importance this attitude has to art is expressed in this quote by Robert Morris:

I believe there are forms to be found within the activity of making as much as within the end products. These are forms of behavior aimed at testing the limits and possibilities involved in that particular interaction between one's actions and the materials of the environment.  

Doing suggests the existence of a mental space. A mentalistic attitude would say an action is simply motor-activity to some mental activity that preceded it. Mentalism suggests an art in which concept is of prime importance and making only a "carry-out." Doing and mentalism are primarily the

temporal progress of an idea within the mental space. It may take physical form but this acts only as a sign between executor and viewer.

Mental space has one striking feature not shared with actual space. It has no dimension or location. It is one of the two main analogues of consciousness for the world, but as it has no location except in time it must then be also an operation. 4

I think most works of art are of a combination of the two attitudes I have presented. The two actions are similar to the point of being identical in some instances. However, the dialectic between them is useful and instructive and it is possible to isolate making from doing. Perhaps this isolation is needed to see the subtle difference between making and doing.

ARCHITECTURAL CONSIDERATIONS: FLOORS, WALLS, AND CEILINGS

The style of minimal art became visible during the late sixties. As a result of this style, the large and important part the surrounding architecture plays in relation to the art object, became obvious. Walls, floors, ceilings and the size of the space became of utmost importance to an art that was a non-illusionistic examination of material and its presence. The characteristics of the art work became part of the containing space.

Of course this relationship between art and its container is not new. In the old cathedrals and palaces of Europe painted ceilings, murals, and elaborate inlayed floors are commonplace. Certainly the huge elaborate space of these structures acts as a powerful sensory experience, possibly more engaging than the art pieces within them.

In the Salon exhibitions of the 19th century, paintings were hung frame-to-frame stretching literally from floor to ceiling. There was no empty wall space to be found and one must have had either to crouch on his knees or stretch his neck to view much of the work. In the paintings characteristic of this time the metaphor was of the window
into deep space and any consideration beyond the frame was not considered. The wall simply did not exist because the frame made the illusion complete.

As stretcher painting became a dominant factor in visual art so also did the rectangle. This is largely because we dwell in structures that are composed of a series of rectangles. The relationship between the paintings and the doors, windows, walls, floors and ceilings became an easy one and a painting could be moved from structure to structure without much difficulty.

It has been suggested by the critic Brian O'Doherty (among many others) that the most important aspect of 20th century art is the white, barren space of the art gallery. Art has changed regularly while the space remains unchanged. Art has moved in and out of these spaces made specifically for its installation. Now in some cases art rejects the gallery completely in lieu of its own presence on Earth, as in art as shelter or construction. It is possible that an art of the future may become more public in nature and more integrated into the daily flow of our lives, not needing the gallery or museum space at all.
At the present time though the gallery space or art in relation to an independent architectural consideration remains a dominant and interesting factor.

Walls provide us with both protection and restriction. They are a strong factor in our perception of art. More imposing than anything that hangs on them, leans against them or stands in front of them. Art cannot simply use walls as a support and ignore their presence otherwise. We now know too much about our own art history to avoid their importance. At the same time we also know too much to simply re-affirm a wall's strength.

...man will go on filling the space between his walls with things that attest to his informing power. He will do so simply because the walls are there and cannot be left naked. And if there are moments in history which try to show the nakedness of the walls (moments of inverted puritanism which insists on the beauty of nakedness and the functional quality of walls), these moments are a dialectical part of the process by which man covers up the walls that surround him. A process which does not aim at doing away with walls (as impossible as that is), but at doing the best one can between the walls that are given is a part of the human condition. 5

Floors and ceilings, though not given the same attention as walls directly, affect the way we perceive art. As I have mentioned before, during the nineteenth century and

earlier, ceilings tended to be very high and often elaborately painted. They created a very large air space and dwarfed the human body in much the same way as the sky would. More recently, ceilings have tended to be lower. Used almost exclusively for lighting, they have been largely neglected as useable space. The height of a ceiling always affects the feeling of intimacy a room has regardless of size.

Floors seem to be more "political" in nature. It seems to be very important when viewing art pieces whether a floor is carpetted, tiled, or wood. Many works of art require a "socially neutral" room. Some art also uses floor space effectively by creating situations in which we must walk around or through obstacles.

Art made to exist in an exhibition or living space must effectively deal with that space. The walls, floors and ceilings of our architecture are an undisputed part of our perceptual vocabulary. Mel Bochner wrote about "the place from which works of art enter our consciousness" and came up with the following list:

1. that which we look up at.
2. that which we look down upon.
3. that which we see straight on.
4. that which we are surrounded by.
5. that which is not seen by looking.
When dealing with work of art the question "where?" is as important as "what". This question puts as much importance on the exhibition space as the piece itself. It is a problem that is unavoidable.
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TITLES AND THE ART OBJECT

The reason I don't title them (my art objects) is that I don't think the work is about allusions. And I think titles always are. And I think the work is very much about that thing there in the space, quite literally. And titles seem to me always to have some allusions to what the thing isn't, and that's why I avoid titles.6

Stella's titles constitute personal associations with the pictures, and he would be horrified at the idea that a viewer might use them as a springboard to content.7

The relationship between a title and an art object is a small part of the much larger concern of the relationship between language and visual art. The conceptual movement in art was characterized by the fact that all of its decisions and all of its discoveries would be reduced to language. Visual art was and still is to a certain degree dominated by images juxtaposed with text, a gradual "de-materialization of the art object." Language, however, can never describe everything that is perceived visually, there is always something that slips through, something that there is no language equivalent for.


There seem to be two main reasons for titles attached to visual art. To continue a narrative and/or to identify a particular object. In both the quotes I have used, Robert Morris and Frank Stella claim to use titles only for the second reason or not at all. They seem to share a viewpoint that the art object has an integrity all its own and to make literary references to it, or to attach some language-related meaning to a visual object whose impact cannot be fully translated into language is without purpose.

For these reasons many artists have simply developed a numbering system for their work for cataloging purposes or, like Frank Stella, have attached titles to the work that simply identify it and make no suggestion of content. In his exotic bird series Stella titles a group of wildly colorful and flashy 3-dimensional constructions with the names of exotic tropical birds. An ironic analogy could be made between the pieces and their titles but no one could deduce that the constructions were in any way representative of the birds.

Taking into account the problems of using language in conjunction with art objects the combination is also potentially rewarding. Consider this idea by Roland Barthes:
When I buy colors, it is by the mere sight of their name. The name of the color (Indian Yellow, Persian Red, Celadon Green) outlines a kind of generic region within which the exact, special effect of the color is unforeseeable, the program of an operation: there is always a certain future in the complete names. 8

There is, of course, no real connection between any object and language except our desire to link them for communication purposes. It seems necessary for us to remember this tendency to think in language and images simultaneously and know when to make the division between the two. Barthes has also suggested that the use of language can become particularly frustrating for the writer as it has existed unchanged for centuries and that perhaps it should change to be more accommodating to someone in this time period. It is something over which the writer has no control. The visual artist does not suffer from this frustration as he manipulates matter, completely on his own terms. However when the visual artist identifies or labels his piece with a word or combination of words he is perhaps burdening the art object with problems that it need not address and that can perhaps only lessen its potential impact.

THE RELEVANCE OF CONTEMPORARY IMPROVISED MUSIC TO THE VISUAL ARTIST.

I think that it is no coincidence that my developing interest of modern improvised (jazz) music has grown in direct relation to my tendency to seek "improvised" alternatives to or progressions from 2-dimensional tradional modes of art making. Improvised music, I think, is based on the attitudes of its creators. It is temporal, abstract thought based on strong historical precedents and structures. Music is primarily an accumulation of raw sound, organized and constructed into a pattern. Improvisation is for me that most complete intelligent organization of that sound, offering a linear train of thought that is comparable to the dialectic that I use in my visual work. The fact that sound is fleeting and not tangible acts as a catalyst to my visual work. When experiencing an improvisation there is no personality behind those sounds. They are simply noise that has probably always existed in the universe harnessed and pushed into a particular direction for a relatively short period of time. The poetics of this spontaneous manipulation are relevant to all of the arts.

To grasp and understand an improvised piece of music is a puzzle or an adventure. Its elements are only with us for
a moment, to disappear and resurface later depending on
which characteristics we are focusing on. It presents
us with a labyrinth of textures, emotions and an intricate
gometry that is even more exciting with the knowledge that
it can never be exactly reproduced.

Though the best forum for improvised music is the live
concert, most of our experience with it comes from
recorded versions. In a way this is a handicap. If an
improvisation is an example of elusive abstract thought
its ultimate effect must be in the live concert, when the
relationship between musician and audience is immediate
and unique. The musician, Steve Lacy, had this to say
about the improviser's interaction with his audience:

You feel the people in your body and
you can't ignore all of that stuff.
It's like driving a car—you feel
the road and you are adjusting every
movement you make to the conditions
of the road. An audience is like
that in the way you can feel it in your
body and everywhere. 9

When an improvisation is recorded it becomes, like visual
art, an object. Perhaps the most rewarding part of visual
art is not the object but the making of that object.

9 Steve Lacy, Interview by Chuck France, Cadence,
December 1978.
If an analogy can be drawn it would be the taping of sound and the filming of an artist at work. After this, the art object and an improvised sound...nothing.

Thus the appeal this music has to me as a visual artist. I could never relate what I do directly to the improvising musician; however, my behavior in the studio and my manipulation of matter follows directly the improviser's involvement with sound. What is most important is not a product but the experience. An object is only documentation.
CONCLUSION:

The art that I have made as a graduate student addresses all the issues that I have discussed in this paper.

The dialectic between making and doing, the relationship between words and the art object, the importance of the exhibition space to the art object and the relationship between the arts (in this case, improvised music), are all issues that I have to address before, during and after the making of an art piece.

Of course the conceiving and making of art objects is an extremely complex phenomena. For any statement made about art there are numerous contradictions possible. I felt the need to seek out and examine the main topics affecting my work as a visual artist. The "back to basics" attitude that I take in my art and writing should not be confused with a reductive attitude. I have no intention of reducing my art out of existence. However, restating the obvious is important to me. So much of the art that I have seen simply passes over the obvious, takes it for granted without an understanding of the complexities involved.

The restating of the obvious and the manipulation of materials without drastically altering their original
form does not produce tautological art. I have found that the possibilities for growth and change in this attitude are infinite. Hundreds of years of art history have examined the same topics I have written about in this paper. I believe it is necessary to keep the obvious in mind and hopefully evolve toward a new set of ideas on what it means to make an art object.
A Selected Bibliography


Constructed Drawing
23" x 29"
magic marker and
graphite on paper
Constructed Drawing
24" x 30"
graphite and collage on paper
PC1
10" top to bottom
plaster, plywood, cardboard and latex
PC5
21" - 23" top to bottom
homosote, plaster,
cardboard, and latex
PC6
21” – 23” top to bottom
homosote, plaster,
cardboard, and latex