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Encounters with the Spatial

**The Relationship of the Spectator to him/ herself and as somehow the Subject of the
Artwork.**

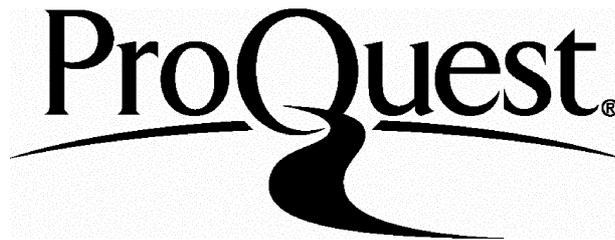
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Encounters with the spatial



The relationship of the spectator to him/ herself and as somehow the subject of the art work.

"The intersection of spatial thought with psychoanalytical thought, of the nature of containment and the characteristics of the subject, has been a preoccupation of social and aesthetic discourse since the turn of the century; certain of the avant-garde movements of the 1920's and 1930's, among them expressionism, explored this intersection in terms of its representation; contemporary experimentation preserves these two terms, while distorting the traditional space of modernism and questioning the equally traditional fiction of the humanist subject." ¹

I am interested in a challenge posed to the viewer by the work of two artists whose rendering of architectural "space" using different media to similar effect confounds the viewer's perception and imagination in the interpretation and understanding of his/her position in relation to the represented "space." A tension is created where the spectator is drawn into the visual frame created by the both artists until he/she becomes a performer within the prescribed space. The ambiguous viewer to "space" in the work position challenges his/her perceptual frame.

The resolution of the phenomenological debate between Husserlian idealist primary perception, solely based on the inherent history of consciousness (thetic intentionalities), and the Merleau-Ponty line that action relates to the living body, fields of meaning (sens), exemplifies understanding the concept of viewing a work of art.

"We mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us, that perception is a nascent logos; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action. It is not a question of reducing

*human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality."*²

This study adds another dimension which is central to this debate, that of viewing the viewed. The standard format of the perceptual frame of the viewer observing a work of art is a one directional process; the viewer stands before a work. Either one of these positions can be considered to be that of the subject. The works examined in this enquiry present the phenomena of a two way process where the viewer experiences being *simultaneously* within the work and observing the work, where a reversal of the subject and object position may occur.

By inverting a well-known quote by Jacques Lacan, the question can be posed, is it the viewer who interprets the work of art or is it the work of art that interprets the viewer?³

The aim is not to resolve the polemic of such phenomenological debate but to provide a further "layer" through the experiential description of these art works. The enquiry will also consider the external frame of reference, i.e. both the position as viewer standing outside a work, and the external framework within which this takes place, (i.e. it could be considered as baroque) and the internal frame of reference, relating to the position of the viewer as the viewed, in phenomenological terms. At a given moment in time one of these might be more attributable to the situation than another.

These issues raised have been the preoccupation of many artists. The works under discussion here have been chosen as the subjects because they have intrinsic value to this study. The text will focus on the different spatial experiences created by the two artists; the *Cafe Bravo* by Dan Graham in Berlin, a built form of three dimensional space and two

¹ Anthony Vidler, *Warped space, Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, MIT Press, (London, England 2000) p viii.

² Merleau-Ponty in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics reader Philosophy and Painting*, Galen A Johnson, Trans Micheal B Smith. North Western University Press Evanston, Illinois 1993 p 8

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Mirror Stage, Seminar 11*

paintings by Magnus Von Plessen, *Raum Figur, (Figure in Space)*, and *7th between 51st and 52nd at 14.30*, the painterly impression of three-dimensional space. Dan Graham creates a three dimensional object where space is physically enclosed or defined with glass, "*It is a sculpture but it is also a pavilion.*"⁴ Magnus Von Plessen uses oil colour to create space on canvas. "*My painting is a space, its a painting not a space. It's not an copy, it's something more.*"⁵ The enquiry will consider three aspects of viewing the viewed focusing on sign, perception and imagination. It would be foolish to conclude that no other works belong in this category or have the inherent alluring spatial quality that I wish to present here. A list of them would have to include *San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane* by Borromini, *The Barcelona Pavilion* by Mies Van De Rohe and Dan Flavin's neon light installations, particularly the example in Königsplatz, (Lenbach House), Munich. All of these have a spellbinding effect on the viewer, which is manifested in different ways. This enquiry is seen against Galen A Johnson's analysis of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of painting within a critical framework of phenomenological thought which addresses the question of how phenomenology contributes to us as a body viewing the viewed.

The Spatial Quality. The Experience of Space. A Brief introduction to the Works.

1. *7th between 51st and 52nd 14.30 2002* Magnus Von Plessen
2. *Raum Figur, (Figure in space) 2002* Magnus Von Plessen

SEE FIG. 12-13

Plessen's paintings alter conventional reality and challenges our perceptual frame creating a situation where the viewer experiences the sensation of being simultaneously on both sides of the canvas. These oil paintings have a particular spatial quality that plays with the viewer's perception often suggesting or depicting a plane *between* the viewer and the scene on the canvas to challenge the viewer's personal threshold or boundary. These paintings

⁴ Thierry De Duve *Ex Situ*, p 26

are not concerned with the *impression* of illusion but to express the glass as a tactile barrier. The paintings abstract the base properties or characteristics of what it is that constitutes the three dimensional glass plane often depicted between viewer and the scene on the canvas but reducing to a minimum any allusion to its literal materiality.

Cafe Bravo, Berlin 1998 Dan Graham

Light reflective surfaces hold an endless fascination. By using glass as the medium for his pavilions Graham creates objects which are in a state of flux reflecting their immediate spatial external and internal environment that provokes the viewer. In an interview with Graham Mike Metz sums up this quality with the comment that,

*"Virtually all his (Graham's) work deals with spectators becoming more aware of their own consciousness, a mediated view of themselves."*⁶

The glass acts as a divider, that plays with the boundary between internal, and the external re the position of the viewer. The physical properties of glass in the Cafe Bravo in the Kunstwerke in Berlin are exploited within the three-dimensional form to frame and provoke the viewer's relation to his/ her spatial context where the external and internal space itself creates a socially interactive performance space.

Sign: The two-dimensional rendering of the spatial.

*"A painting cannot be substituted for a thousand words, nor may a thousand words replace a painting."*⁷

⁵ Magnus Von Plessen conversation with the artist 01.09.02

⁶ Dan Graham *Two-Way mirror Power*, Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art, ed Alberro, Mit Press, London UK 1999 Dan Graham Two way Mirror Power p 68

⁷ Galen A Johnson, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, Philosophy and Painting, Trans M B Smith Northwestern University Press Illinois 1993 p 32

7th between 51st and 52nd 14.30, Magnus Von Plessen 2002

A painting has the advantage of silence. Meaning may be given to the canvas in the form of an image by the act of painting an image but whether the viewer interprets that meaning or not is based on their imagination and their perception of how they *look* at the image and what they then see. This is not to devalue the image as Sartre did in stating that an image that provokes an emotive response only does so as it is an affective (subjective) reaction between the imagined aesthetic object generated in the relation between the viewer and the painting or the performance rather than (objective) reaction between the work and the world. A painting can speak in many ways. Cézanne,

"Writes in painting what had never yet been painted." ⁸

Plessen's work gives the viewer the uncanny sensation of being on both sides of the canvas at once, a physical impossibility and therefore a difficult sensation to provoke in the observer. A comparison can be drawn between this and the example of giving and receiving an injection; one cannot experience the pain of receiving the injection at the same time as administering the injection. I.e. if we look at Van Gogh's painting of his ear with his earcut off we cannot explain or identify with it unless there is another layer, unless it by some means it is suggested or hinted at that the viewer is addressed or shown to be the subject. Plessen's painting's however bridge this mental and physical gap.

In the example of *Un Bar Aux Folies Bergère* Manet painted a mirror. The painted form, the signifier that he gave colour to, gave form to a mirror, the signified. Plessen's works suggest a fusion of the process of signifier and signified the act of painting and the painting itself.

"I apply the brush stroke at the same time imagining how it feels to be observing this action as if from the other side of the canvas. The nature of this process can be seen as

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Cezanne's Doubt* The Merleau Ponty Aesthetic's Reader Ed. Galen A. Johnson Trans. M.B Smith Northwestern University Press Evanston Illinois 1993 p 68

*simultaneous and two -fold. One observes the action from within the painting. Then there is a change in the position to the other side of the canvas."*⁹

The act of seeing becomes manifested in the physical painting and is then translated into a mental process.

*"What I see becomes physical, then you, the onlooker, have to make this spatial again."*¹⁰

Plessen's paintings are not iconic. There is no clear relationship or resemblance between the painted figures on the canvas and us. The application of paint in deft brush strokes produces an *interpretation* of form on the canvas. These forms have no apparent physiognomy. No recognisable features are painted here. Apparent figures emerge from the canvas but without detailed hands, feet, noses, mouths or eyes. The priority here is similar to Cézanne's in conveying the glance in the essence of a face and not in the physiognomy of the face.

"If I paint all the little blues and all the little browns, I capture and convey his glance.

Who gives a damn if they have any idea how one can sadden a mouth or make a cheek smile by wedding a shaded green to a red."¹¹

In the same way that the personality of Cézanne's subjects are captured in the glance, our attention is captured by the *essence* of the painted form depicted on the canvas which is represented by no more and no less than no more than the tactility present in the energy of the brush strokes and a combination of colours.

The ambiguity of the image leads to an ambiguity of terms by which to define these works. The paintings can be termed as indexical (Sartre) as there is no apparent resemblance binding the sign and signified.

⁹ Magnus Von Plessen, Conversation with the artist 17.09.02

¹⁰ Magnus Von Plessen Conversation with the artist 17.09.02

Plessen's paintings correspond to the Merleau Ponty theory. These images cannot affect us unless we allow the abstraction to work for us. We may summon all the powers available to our imagination for the aesthetic experience, (vision of all that is in the visible) from which point our powers of observation might reveal the sign of the painting. This then allows us to be drawn across the canvas. This essence is derived from one principal dynamic, static against movement. (The other "sens" will be considered further in perception and imagination). In Plessens paintings, in accordance with Merleau-Ponty theory, the world is revealed by the work, to view it is central to the aesthetic experience. The artwork is not "opaque", (as in Sartre's terms) but although not clearly transparent its abstraction is decipherable as something through which the world is disclosed.

Sign

The three dimensional rendering of the spatial, Dan Graham, Cafe Bravo, Kunstwerke, Berlin 1998

The quality of duality, the feeling of being at once in two worlds at once provides the primary dynamic in Graham's pavilion. There is an apparent ambiguity for the viewer in terms of identity and site.

*" The here of the spectator is never a place in the strict sense of the word. It is either a "there" for another spectator watching, or a space reduced by its own reflection. "*¹²

When I was there recently having breakfast a small child went to lean her bicycle against one of the walls of the external "V" formed between the two glass cubes and then once there suddenly noticing all the reflections around her, became confused and started to cry.

Location, form material

, Actual function cafe/ implied function internal external" stage" space

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Cezanne's Doubt* The Merleau Ponty Aesthetic's Reader Ed. Galen A. Johnson Trans. M.B Smith Northwestern University Press Evanston Illinois 1993 p 66

Sited within the context of a gallery in Berlin Cafe Bravo can be described as a piece of sculpture, an art-work and also a working cafe, social lounge and rendezvous area for the gallery. The casual visitor to the Cafe Bravo is confronted with a three-dimensional mirror and glass object which inspite of having edges is enigmatic. There is a relationship of resemblance between sign and referent; the physical property of the mirror to reflect its immediate surroundings sets up a direct relationship with *anything* in or entering its reflected field but this relationship is filled with ambiguity which is what endlessly fascinates the observer. The sign of the Cafe Bravo can be seen in purely iconic terms. A distortion of this term occurs due to the interrelationship between the form and the material of the object and its interplay with its location.

While the actual function of the object is a cafe there is an implied secondary theme. The pavilion provides a piece of theatre. A "stage space" is set up within which the viewer's perceptual frame is therefore challenged. The viewer therefore advertently or inadvertently enters the frame of the object unaware of being a performer in this voyeuristic space.

"Virtually all his (Graham's) work deals with spectators becoming more aware of their own consciousness, a mediated view of themselves." ¹³

By the sheer nature of its material fabric and its geometry Cafe Bravo provides a plethora of ambiguities for the viewer. The viewer is presented with a definitive three-dimensional form that only when viewed from above, can be formally understood in its context. From ground level the geometry of the cubes and their relationship to the orthogonal external space and the combination of mirrored and transparent glass of which it is made confounds.

The sign of location

The juxtapositions created by the site between the exterior and interior of the cafe and the interior and exterior of the courtyard provides a unique (backdrop) for the semi-interior or enclosed condition for the object. A unique stage space is created in an "interior" Berlin Hof (courtyard) environment that constantly reflects the surrounding conditions and generates new internal and external spaces.



Cafe Bravo Berlin. View from Kunstwerke, photograph FJG

Sign of the form

"Cafe Bravo is based on the two cubes from Louis Kahn" ¹⁴

Viewed from above as an architectural or sculptural form the Cafe Bravo appears to be deceptively simple to understand; two 4,05,5 m cubes playfully and dynamically set against

Dan Graham, *Two way Mirror Power*, Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art ed Alberro Mit Press London 1999 p 189

¹⁴ Dan Graham, Conversation with the artist, 17.09.02

each other, as seen in the photograph the left one transparent glass, the right opaque, which barely touch at the mid point on the length of the cafe.

The original concept for the pavilion although quite different in form, a pergola, embraced similar psychological and phenomenological issues. A challenge to the perceptual frame is set up in a play between what is perceived by the viewer as inside and outside, theatricality and spectacle, audience and performer. The interplay of sign and referent here and were not unconscious as Dan Graham's notes here reveal and were manifested in the realised project

*"In the "Per" la/conservatory the domed concave overhead glass tunnel is a lightly reflective 2 way mirror, not, as is normal, transparent glass. Spectators looking up towards this through the intertwining vines will see an amorphically distorted image of their own body like the images of saints and gods in baroque church ceilings except that here it is the viewer's own body. Through this image they will also see the sky. The intensity of the self reflected image varies continuously due to the shift in sunlight. Because of the properties of 2 way mirrors the more direct the sunlight on top of the 2-way mirror vault, the darker the internal ceiling. Thus the more light falling on the top of the ceiling, the more one sees the image of ones own body, relative to the transparent image of the sky above."*¹⁵ Cafe with vines

As the viewer in a geometric glass cube juxtaposed against the external frame of classical buildings significant questions are raised both in relation to oneself and in a wider context. In his/ her reflection in the object and the reflected contextual frame of the object the viewer's position within a world framework is addressed. The work reveals and discloses but also poses questions on a micro level, to the immediate environment, and on the macro level;

¹⁵ Dan Graham. Fax sent to Berlin 6 January 1995 for an early concept for the cafe (in Cafe Bravo Portfolio Dan Graham with Nalbach + Nalbach Architekten, Exhibition Thomas Schultes Gallerie, Berlin August 2002, Berlin)

ones position within the greater world context. This can be interpreted as a playful address.

However the work does provoke reflection and contemplation.

Material /Glass as Sign

The use of glass as a medium creates an object that is in a constant state of flux by nature of the reflection of its immediate external and internal environment. The glass acts as a divide, a physical but transparent and reflective boundary between internal and external in relation to the position of the viewer; as a material element it defines "space" and at the same time confounds by reflecting "space" and introducing illusion.

"It alienates "subject" from "object". From behind glass, the Spectator's view is "objective" while the observed's subjectivity is Concealed. The observer on the outside of the glass cannot be part of an interior group's "intersubjective" framework...."

Abstractedly, this reflectiveness of glass allows it to be a sign signifying, at the same time, the nature of the opposition between the two spaces and their common mediation. The glass (as a vertical plane) through its reflectiveness unites, and by its physical impenetrability separates inside and outside." ¹⁶

Visitors to the cafe react to each other from both sides of the glass. On suddenly catching oneself reflected in this particular location, in a very contained public place, in an external environment, in a gallery context, questions of sign in relation to art as a commodity, ones own identity within an art environment and the place for public art are precipitated.

The Sign of the mirror

The mirrored glass largely used in the construction of the cubes has multiple sign meaning.

Dan himself describes his pavilions as "utopia's". It seems appropriate to cite the Foucauldian definition of the spatial effect of the mirror.

"heterotopias which are disturbing"¹⁷ and "utopias which afford consolation."¹⁸

"Between these two is the mirror, which partakes of the qualities of both types of location."¹⁹

In the reflected surfaces of the mirrored glass the viewer is constantly questioning what is and what is not reality. Is the new space created in this reflected world somewhere or nowhere?

And where do I belong in this context?

"The mirror is after all, a utopia, in that it is a place without a place. In it I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up potentially beyond its surface; there I am down there where I am not, a sort of shadow that makes my appearance visible to myself, allowing me to look at myself where I do not exist; utopia of the mirror. At the same time, we are dealing with a heterotopia. The mirror really exists and has a kind of comeback effect on the place that I occupy: starting from it in fact, I find myself absent from the place where I am, in that I see myself there. Starting from that gaze which to some extent is brought to bear on me, from the depths of that space which is on the other side of the mirror, I turn back on myself, beginning to turn my eyes on myself and reconstitute myself where I am in reality. Hence the mirror functions as a heterotopia, since it makes the place that I occupy, whenever I look at myself in the glass, both absolutely real-it is in fact linked to all the surrounding space-and

¹⁶ DG Two way mirror power Dan Graham *Two-Way mirror Power*, Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art, Ed. Alberro, Mit Press, London UK 1999 p 62

¹⁷ Michel Foucault. *Ceci n'est pas un pipe*, p 4 University of California Press 1983

¹⁸ Michel Foucault. *Ceci n'est pas un pipe*, p 4 University of California Press 1983.

absolutely unreal, for in order to be perceived it has of necessity to pass that virtual point that is situated down there”²⁰

At this point of conjecture between real and virtual world of glass and the mirror it seems logical to enter the world of the imagination.

Imagination

The faculty of forming images in the mind, Imaginary - not real, illusory²¹

The consensus of a philosophy based on perception and body. Imagination is characterised as spontaneous and free, less bound, if at all bound to the imposed givens of sensation. Sartre, Hegel, Kant²²

Imagination seems to refer us to a faculty or acts of consciousness that are different from perception: imagination is free and not bound to the givens of sensation. It may refer to the mental image seen by the mind or actual images. This concerns what we mean by an imaginative mental act and the mental image raised by painting. Merleau-Ponty argues that the task of painting is expressing what exists, Sartre that it is the expression of what does not exist as *images* are distinguished from perceptions or sensations as nothingness or nihilation. Imagination is not bound to body, place time, circumstance or situation. Malraux describes the mental image as the creative acts of consciousness artists perform in arriving at a work. It is more complex than this as in addition to referring to a creative mental act; imagination may also refer to a mental or a real image.

¹⁹Michel Foucault. *Of Other Spaces Utopias and Heterotopias Architecture Culture 1943-1968* ed. Joan Ockman p 422 Columbia Books Of Architecture, Rizzoli

Michel Foucault. *Of Other Spaces Utopias and Heterotopias Architecture Culture 1943-1968* ed. Joan Ockman p422, Columbia Books Of Architecture, Rizzoli

²¹ Collins Dictionary definition

Dan Graham·The pavilion as a showcase

*"My pavilions mostly suggest the world of amusement, play and entertainment; they are mini spectacles"*²³

Subtly without the use of any technological means such as video or movie camera Cafe Bravo is a device by the very nature of its physical make up within its contextual situation challenges the imagination of the viewer while simultaneously allowing other viewers to participate in the spectacle.

While extremely consistent in his themes inspite of employing different technological devices to pursue his themes the author maintains that change in his art objects have occurred only in terms of a shift of emphasis from pieces,

*"that were camera obscuras- where one was placed inside the camera and referred to the optical system per se-to showing the spectator, in terms of the perceptual process, as an audience, as a spectator, rather than as a work of art."*²⁴

The idea of the showcase here has a double meaning. To experience Cafe Bravo is to experience a theatre play in which we the viewers are also the performers. We first have to appreciate this before we can imagine that we are a part of this in this sense. The stage area has been set up. There are different backdrops.

²² Galen A Johnson

²³ Dan Graham Architecture, Feedback: An Exchange of Faxes and Projects, AA Publications 1977 p18

²⁴ Dan Graham, Two way Mirror Power, Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art ed Alberro Mit Press London 1999 p 189



Scene change - *Cafe Bravo Berlin Dan Graham*, 1998 photo FJG 2002

Weather and seasonal changes and everyday life in the courtyard ensure a steady change in the scenery. There is a wealth of new talent waiting in the wings in the form of a new public and tourists who enter and leave the "stage" at regular intervals. Standing in a particular position one may see oneself reflected in two or three panes of glass at once with different background contexts depending on ones angle of vision. At the same time one is aware that one can see everyone else and if so they can see us.



The Viewer and the viewed, Cafe Bravo, Dan Graham, 1998 Photograph FJG.

The theatricality of this work is undeniable. Advertently or inadvertently we are the audience of part of a spectacle (an idea first explored by Graham in the Venice Biennale project-Two Adjacent Pavilions). Through the use of mirrored glass and two way mirrors different situations are constantly experienced by the viewer depending on which side of the glass they are standing, inside or outside, and who else is viewing the work. The onlooker can imagine having the part of a performer. There is a natural audience/performer relationship because of the voyeur condition set up by people positioned on both sides of the glass. Using the human performers or the public an unconscious reciprocal theatre is set up on both sides of the glass between the interior and exterior of the cafe where individuals react to each other from their respective sides of the glass in an architectonic pavilion. One perceives them as the public but ones imagination transforms them into performers because of the division of the glass barrier.



View out to the courtyard from within the transparent cube *Cafe Bravo* Dan Graham
Berlin 1998 Photo FJG 2002

The ability of the viewer to imagine him/herself in a spectator/audience role is increased by the location, function and transparency/opacity of the pavilion in relation to its possible definition as an art-work-seen-within-the-context-of-a-gallery. Is this an art work or a functional space/sculpture/architectonic pavilion? If it is an art-work one can imagine that we are therefore unconscious performers/commodities in a "glass showcase" where the concept of the "showcase" is taken one step further than in the *Two Adjacent Pavilions in the Venice Biennale* which clearly defined itself as an art work. Perhaps the whole setting is a stage. This brings into question whether this pavilion is part of a play on the non-gallery art idea (pioneered by Graham and Flavin as a reaction to art as a commodity and exemplified by *Two adjacent pavilions*) which mimicked the white cube (gallery). *Cafe Bravo* could be seen as the ultimate parody of white cube idea; a non-white (two) cube, (functional) artwork placed within the context of but just physically outside a gallery environment. The pavilion

precipitates questions as to role of the artwork as a commodity, the role of the art public and the role of the gallery.

Perception

"Perception" The act or power of perceiving the apprehension of any modification of consciousness. The combining of sensations into a recognition of an object.²⁵

The perceptual process is central to the understanding of the Cafe Bravo as an enigma. The experience of this pavilion places our powers of perception under attack. The cafe Bravo is optically deceptive.

Our powers of perception can be deceived. That which we perceive as derived from the information from our sensory perception can still thwart reality. Cafe Bravo challenges the viewer's ability to differentiate between real and perceived planes or layers of two and three dimensionality. The material fabric of the pavilion is by its reflective nature deceptive. In addition to the ambiguity generated by the glass reflections the placing of architectural elements within the object introduces further ambiguities. Visitors frequently experience problems finding the entrance into the cafe. The door to the cafe is not clearly recognisable as a door either in an open or closed position. Its location, adjacent to the narrow gap between the juxtaposed cubes is visually a very confusing area. The opaque glass of the cube to the immediate right of the door reflects the opposite classical facade while to the left the transparent glass is semi-reflective and situated between the two the probability that the view to the interior beyond framed by the open door is real, in this context, seems highly unlikely. The only clear visual aid that provides a hint of the physical reality of the three-dimensional interior as opposed to the two dimensional reflection is the threshold where the horizontal plane of the interior floor surface interrupts the pattern of the paving stones.



Planar play, Cafe Bravo, Dan Graham 1998 Photo FJG planes.

Watching people trying to find the door is the source of much amusement for those sitting in side and outside. Having found ones way in one is loath to leave to go to the restrooms, situated in the main building off the Hof, for fear of not finding the entrance again.

²⁵ Chambers English Dictionary 1992



"Raum figur," Magnus Von Plessen, 2002, oil on canvas

In "Raum Figur" the viewer is quite simply spiralled into the space created in the canvas. It is about representation and de-materiality, the reality of the painting, but also about the artist's subjectivity.

Combined with Plessen's deliberate defiance of perspective logic the painting technique creates an astonishing spatial effect for the viewer.

*"One has the feeling of observing the depicted figure from both behind and in front, that one is looking into and out from the painting at the same time,"*²⁶

This is achieved by the viewer's eye being led by a strong rotational pull to the right due to the technique of the closely spaced flourishing vertical brush strokes used to depict the figure of the figure at the front of the painting who acts as a fulcrum point on the canvas. One's eye

is caught by this motion and propelled by this spinning motion into the space beyond or on the other side of the figure, which gives a vivid sense of being in three-dimensional space. Caught up in this tail-spin motion one's eye is drawn around the figure until one has the sensation of being in the space containing a chair and two ambiguous forms, in the depicted scene painted on the other side of the figure on the canvas. One is simultaneously on both sides of the canvas.

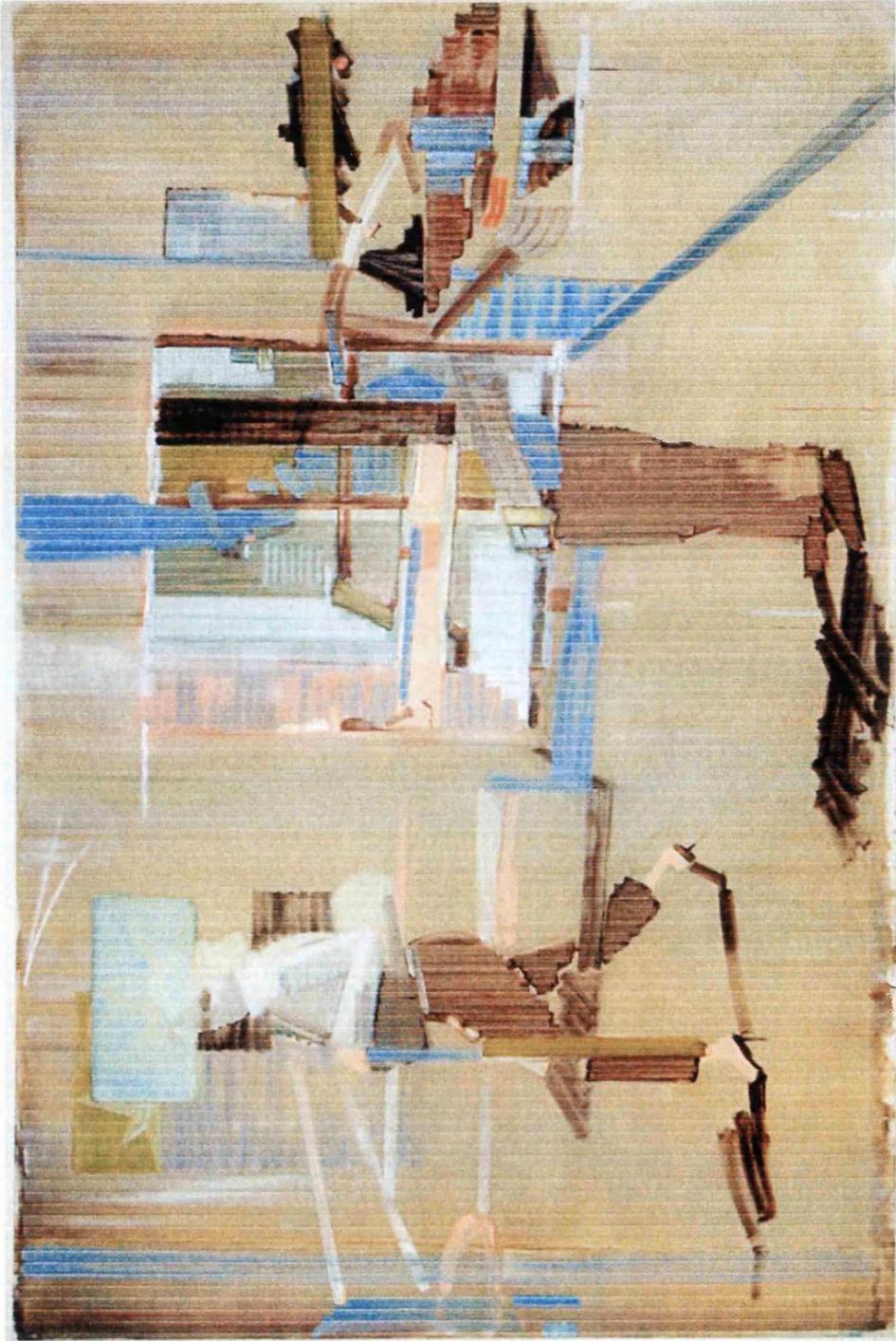
Plessen's painting *7th between 51st and 52nd 14.30* and the tension suggested by the title regarding the space and (caught) moment between the two seems to combine ^{the} possibility of combining the mental image Malraux referred to in the definition of imagination with the looser phenomenology of "perception" outlined *In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of painting - "Imagination remains a variant of perception, but the fabric of perception is more loosely knit, allowing interruptions and discontinuities, mixings, foldings and intertwinings between visible and invisible, real and imaginary."*²⁷

which would support a less definitive relationship between perception and imagination.

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²⁶ Magnus Von Plessen, *In Conversation with the Artist*, April 2002

²⁷ Galen A Johnson, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, Philosophy and Painting*, Trans M B Smith Northwestern University Press Illinois 1993 p 28





7th between 51st and 52nd 14.30 Magnus Von Plessen 2002

*"He is the onlooker of the painting, if you imagine to be in his position then you understand it. You see someone who sees what you see."*²⁸

The viewer in front of the painting should see the following. There *is* a figure in the middle of this picture, which is not, reflected anywhere in the picture. There is another figure in the picture which is reflected more than once in the picture; once in what can be perceived of as a floating frame in front of the central figure and again further back in a mirror or window to the back right-hand side of the picture.

"If there is logic to this painting then it could be the following. The onlooker in front of the painting makes the painting work and gets to see what the painting reveals if he *imagines* to be in the position of the male figure in the middle of the painting."²⁹

²⁸ Magnus Von Plessen Conversation with the artist 16.09.02

²⁹ Magnus Von Plessen conversation with the artist 17.09.02

This central figure is the viewer of the scene, which the painting reveals according to the logic of the painting's construction. Emphasis on the use of bright powder blue paint on the top layer of paint on the outer surface of the canvas evokes the property of the reflectivity of glass. The observer perceives this as glass.

"I can't paint glass. but the sensation/feeling of glass on canvas with pigment. I see someone combing the hair,I feel it. My paintings give that sensation. "

The links back to ones own body is very much a Merleau- Ponte theme. The power of the central fulcrum figure around which the rest of the constructed scene appears almost literally to revolve, is motionless and floating as if he is the controller of the scene, the centre of this painted world. The savage manner of the crossed brush strokes that are used to depict his shadow emphasise motionlessness literally crossing out any idea of movement as opposed to the female figure who is depicted as moving. In a similar way the brush strokes depicting her shadow echoes this motion. If our perception accepts the presence of the glass or transparent layer here we perceive that she turns and catches sight of herself in the glass. He is at the fulcrum of the composition, at the centre of the visual world as we the viewer can be at any one time. The construct of the painting is then clear.

"I am not so interested in the artist's gaze as a gaze, which is controlling everything and therefore transforms every viewer into a model for his work .I find the concept that one can get into a picture and then see and understand the painting from within the painting much more interesting. It's about creating a space which allows for a playful movement of the gaze and the imagination without fixed positions for the viewer or fixed axis for the gaze. " ³⁰

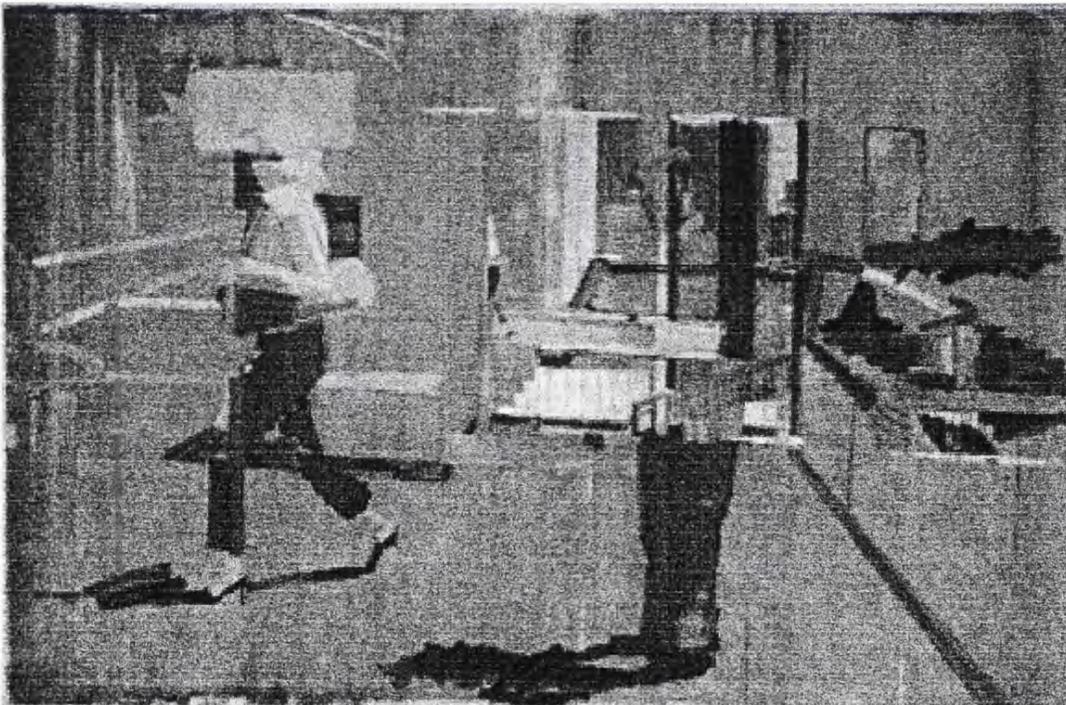
Our perception tells us that we cannot be

"Inside and outside cannot be seen at the same time, ³¹ "

That we cannot be physically in two worlds at once. Our imagination transports us across the canvas, through the glass.

"The painting intends to be both a view of the world and a framed representation of what it means to look at the world. The onlooker of the painting is getting into the painting."³²

It is about looking at something and being observed, of being on both sides of the canvas at the same time but to have the phenomena of this experience requires both our perception and our imagination.



7th between 51st and 52nd 14.30 Magnus Von Plessen 2002 (Black and white)

Curiously in error I opened this image and collapsed it into only black and white.

Immediately the image became clear to me. The black and white somehow renders the

³⁰ Magnus Von Plessen Conversation with the artist 17.09.02

painting much more three-dimensional than it is in colour and what may have been incomprehensible becomes clear. One now perceives quite clearly that a car is reflected in the right of the painting. If this is so we the viewer are in an extraordinary position. We must be standing before a huge transparent glass (window) in which everything except the central figure is reflected which means that they are all behind us. If the central figure is not reflected on which side is he? A dash of blue delineates the corner of his "frame" catching the light on the glass but on which side? He is between us and the glass but at the same time his framework is reflective. The ambiguities are endless but a physical connection between he and us is made quite poignant. That he is blocking my view of that which is reflected informs me that he must be in front of me. He and I somehow occupy the same position on the same side of the glass. So the suggestion may be that we are one and the same.

The position of the spectator vis a vis the artist's work is different here. Graham cannot determine what we see here and ~~is~~ therefore has a more passive role as the artist ~~does~~. The mirror provides an ambivalent situation. Graham has more room to be subjective because the mirror by its nature is never blank. Graham gives us a lesser contextual frame than that generated by the painting. The painting provides much more to react against. The painter can determine what we see. He activates the image that we see. He creates the subject that creates a dialogue. More is asked of the viewer of the painting. Graham's mirror allows us to patently see that we are the subjects. A different demand is made addressing a different part of the brain ~~is needed~~. Abstraction is needed ~~painting~~ to understand the painting. To make the painting's logic work for the viewer is much more difficult.

³¹ Rudolph Arnheim, *The Split and the Structure*, Twenty-eight essays, pp 48,49 1996

³² Magnus Von Plessen Conversation with the artist 17.09.02

Conclusion-the next dimension, the next layer

I was recently told that to experience Las Meninas by Velasquez in the Prado was similar to being swallowed. Apparently Las Meninas used to hang with a mirror opposite it. This must have provided an incredible spatial experience. On entering the domed space of Borromini's San Carlo Alle Quattro Fontane the echo of the floor to the dome composed of four geometric forms literally sucks one up into the space. It is interesting to note that Richard Serra commented that his torqued ellipses owe much to the latter example. These spaces almost have another dimension. The dome places the viewer in a position between two apparent points while the reflection of Las Meninas in a mirror hung opposite places the viewer in a similar position in a dynamic relation to two points of reference. The experience of Borromini's domed space or Las Meninas when seen in that particular context can perhaps be described as a fusion of the spatial experience provided by Graham and Plessen for the viewer.

It may be the ambiguity regarding the conventional position of the artist and viewer in the example of these works set into play by the psychological and phenomenological games by such artists as Plessen and Graham that at once confound and compel and provoke the viewer by challenging his powers of imagination and perception. Much effort is required by the viewer to abstract himself from an understanding of "reality" to enter into this world and decipher the logic. As Freud advised, we have first to recognise where we are before we can move on. The combinations of the immediacy but at the same time the apparent intangibility of these works are qualities that make them so alluring. In addition to this it may be that these works embody some quality central to today, something utterly contemporary with which today's subject can identify.

At a given moment in time one of the following, the external frame of reference with regard to both the position as viewer standing outside a work, and the external framework within which this takes place, (i.e. perhaps we are about to enter a neo baroque stage) and the internal frame of reference, relating to the position of the viewer as the viewed, in phenomenological terms, might be more attributable to an interpretation of the perceptual frame of the phenomena of viewing the viewed than another. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* basically summed this up. In 'Cézanne's doubt' Merleau-Ponty focuses on the standing of the art work and artist in relation to the visible world, there are more points which relate to the phenomenology of painting. Evidently Merleau-Ponty felt that Cézanne's work did not lend itself to the discussion of all of these principles. The reader should make a decision regarding where they stand on this issue based on their own experience of the evidence presented before them.

"Yet although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends upon our own way of seeing" p 10 (*Ways of seeing*, John Berger)

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