

THE GREAT WHITE WAY

Robert Jay Wolff

When I look back upon those shadowy afternoons of long ago as I wandered through the soft and quiet light of the Louvre, the one thing that comes back to me in total recall is the dominating presence of the work of art. I have only a hazy memory of architectural tangles, of walls and doors and light sources, or the ways and means employed in the installation of the works on view. I remember only individual, magical illusions, existing in an anonymous atmosphere which seemed to be created not for the paintings, but by the paintings. The diffused light from above (I suppose there were skylights) did not illuminate the paintings but helped them in their task of self-illumination. The spaces of the rooms were generous, dark and recessive. I do not recall being surrounded by walls with paintings. I only remember with undiminishing vividness the presence of great works of art.

To provide an experience like this must surely be the goal of any art museum. Yet here, precisely, is where our newer institutions with all their technical resources and studied know-how, have failed. Today one hears much about how well such and such an exhibition has been installed and coordinated; how cleverly a certain curator has created a particular background, or a special kind of lighting, or a new type of space divider. Somehow exhibitions of art have become reflections of the "art" of installation and only incidentally project the art so installed.

When a painter is said to be the victim of his own mannerisms, we imply that he is inflexibly bound to the means he has invented. He surrenders the freedom to meet new problems to the sure-fire identity of an established manner. An authentic style, on the other hand, is master of its own fluctuating insights. It refuses to be identified with this mastery, often destroying it to preserve the integrity of those unpredictable but original compulsions which are the life blood of painting. Both Picasso and Paul Klee are great stylists in this sense. Both take their identities, not from rigid, idiomatic inventions, but from a masterly use of unlimited freedom.

If the struggle for this kind of integrity is a factor in painting, why should it not extend to the way paintings are installed? One expects museum specialists to be endowed with perceptive skills sufficiently acute to detect success or failure in this struggle. They are respected for their ability to distinguish the true from the false in art. Yet one sees the same handsome and inept stereotype used in one museum exhibition after another. Masterpieces of great diversity are subordinated to a uniform atmosphere, reflecting the self-enchanted mannerisms of the very authorities who, we hope, would not tolerate evidence of the same spirit in the works they so meticulously sponsor.

What should essentially identify the installation task? The museum or the individual works

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exhibited? Mr. Wright has given his immortal answer, but no serious artist will accept it. The Guggenheim Museum is such an all out, unblushing revelation of the neurotic ego-mania behind current art patronage that all other museums, by comparison, can claim a pure and selfless dedication to the work of art. But the Guggenheim is only an exaggeration of a situation where the same tendency is often expressed in more subtle ways.

For instance, the ubiquitous white wall. Why white? It is surely common knowledge that a white wall will dominate anything on or near it. Moreover it will make any darker object look smaller than it is and itself, by contrast, more expansive. To prove this one has only to place a small black circle on a larger white square and compare the effect of the same size circle in white on black. The black circle on white will look smaller than it is.

I suggest that the predominance of white walls and bright white light in museum exhibitions tends spatially to exalt the total installation. The individual works, by contrast, cling like postage stamps to the walls. One is constantly confronted by a panorama of paintings, never by the power of a single work. For when one approaches a work for itself one finds the life gone out of it, the victim of its competitive surroundings.

In this overpowering atmosphere of institutional egotism only the most aggressive paintings can survive. These are works whose impact is so forceful and instantaneous that an immediate response is inescapable under any conditions. These are the master monologues which attract disciples rather than communicants, which demand swift and unconditional surrender and ask nothing of their happy victims beyond the sensation of having been thoroughly conquered.

This is the art of attack, of unrelenting aggressiveness. It is the most successful public art of today (the painting of Jackson Pollock, for example). Somehow it has managed to assert itself in the face of all efforts to subordinate it to the domineering and competitive personality of the typical museum environment.

There is, on the other hand, the quiet, meditative art of Paul Klee or Piet Mondrian. This is an art of intimate dialogue between painter and onlooker, requiring undistracted contemplation. It asks to be met halfway and will respond only to the creative exertions of thoughtful perceptivity. In the heady, carnival atmosphere of the typical modern museum it is no wonder that the work of Paul Klee withdraws within itself, becoming opaque and inaccessible, and, on gala occasions, even meaningless.

Perhaps one of the most disastrous statements by a painter was the dictum of Maurice Denis who proclaimed in 1890 that "a picture . . . is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." Most painters now have written off this concept as brave nonsense. But not the museum people. The implication that a painting is primarily an activated surface indicates that it is dead until illuminated from without. Flood it with light

or it cannot be seen. The number of paintings whose inner, sub-surface light has been overwhelmed and extinguished by "good lighting" cannot be counted. Consider the magic light of a Vermeer interior in the relentless, uniform whiteness of the Guggenheim Museum ramp. Even the strong arm of Franz Kline went limp under these circumstances. His massive white areas for the first time looked sick and bedraggled and in need of a bath.

The now almost universal practice of indiscriminate floodlighting throws a killing white-out over the kind of painting that lives only when the surface is dissolved by a more powerful inner illusion and light, by the mystery of intangible imagery. There are left among contemporary painters many who still cling to the traditional insistence that the illusion must not only dominate but, in fact, obliterate the means employed in creating it. For these, the direct illumination of the pigmented surface for its own sake is disastrous. A. D. Reinhardt, whose complex and delicate dark paintings have never been properly installed, never has been able to convince the people in charge of these things that they are wrong in assuming that because a painting is dark it will not be seen unless it is flooded with light. As a result, the shifting illusions in Reinhardt's painting have never been fully experienced outside of his own studio, which consists of an old loft on lower Broadway with one large window facing west and a few weak, uncovered incandescent bulbs.

Opposed to the illusionists are the far more numerous actionists, the painters who are committed to the precept that art is action, and that action and illusion are incompatible. Here of course the surface is all important, involving mountains of pigment, striated, furrowed and battered by brush and spatula, and spattered with rich drippings and ribbons of creamy paint squeezed from the tube. This indeed calls for bright lights and close inspection.

One of the reasons why action painting has dominated the contemporary art world to the exclusion of almost everything else may, I suggest, be found in the fact that it is the only type of painting that can hold its own against the crudities of the museum lighting expert.

If I were asked what I miss most in the museum world today I would say it is institutional modesty, even self-effacement. If I were a museum authority I would try to dematerialize everything but the work of art itself. I would give each painting its own uniquely required light. I would even try a return to a version of those old fashioned muted lamps that once were attached to the frame. I would try to make the walls, the ceiling, the building disappear. Instead of relating paintings in a schematic way announcing my own identity I would isolate and emphasize the existence of each single work. I would abandon large coordinated exhibitions.

I would concentrate on each island of art for its own sake and on its own terms. I would measure my success by the degree of anonymity I achieved and by the extent to which I kept each work exclusively, vividly and perpetually alive. I would become again the unseen, devoted guardian of art and send my impresario's mantle back to Broadway where it belongs.