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FROM PAINTING TO PERCEPTION/EXPERIENCE/MEANING

By

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B.F.A., University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh, 1971

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate
School of the University of Colorado in partial
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Master of Fine Arts

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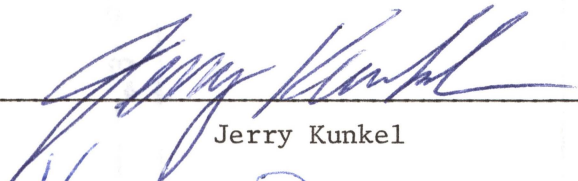
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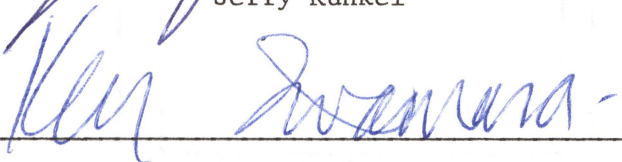
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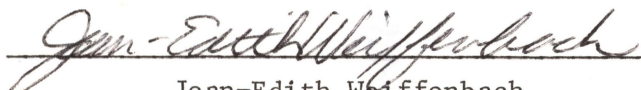
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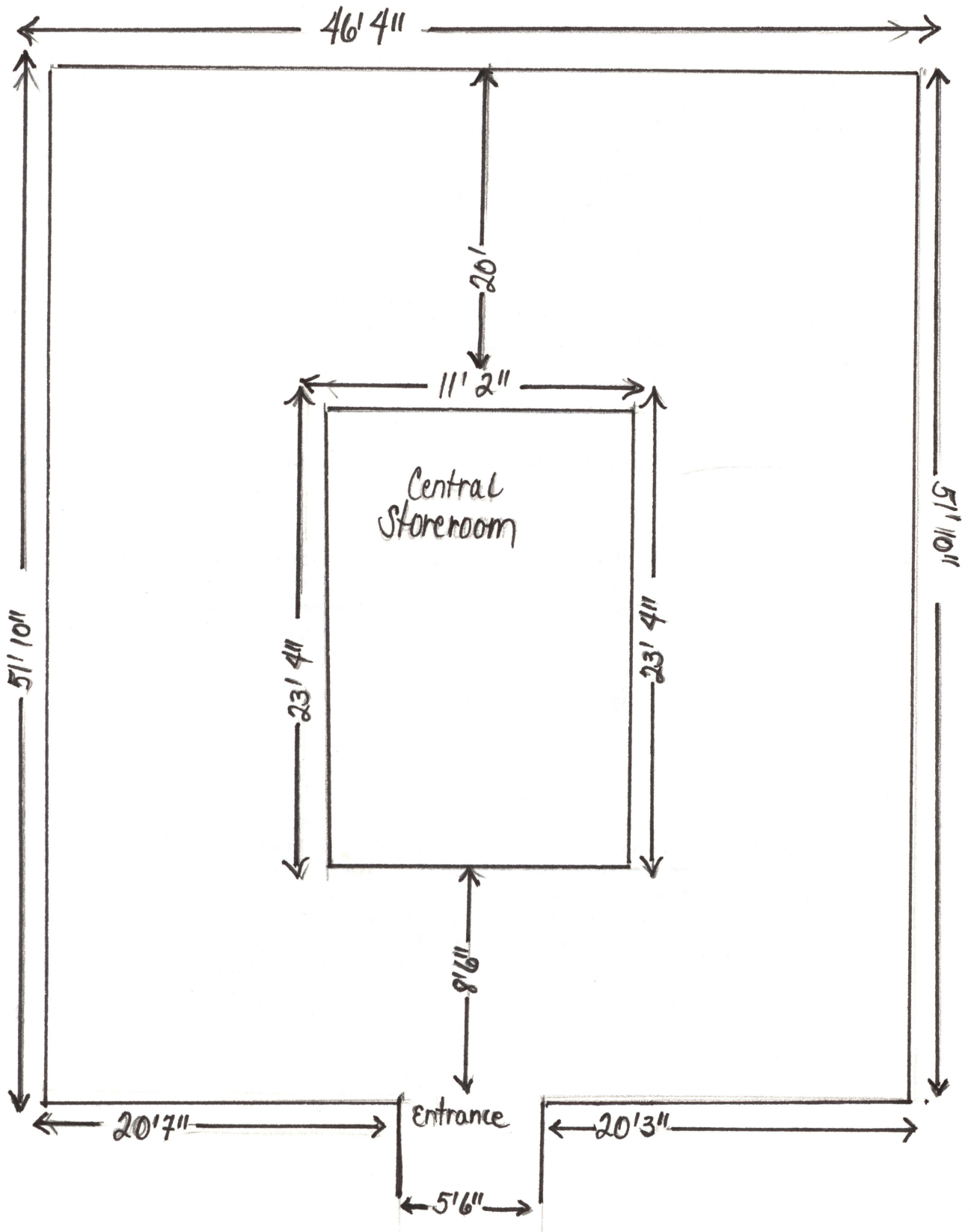


Jean-Edith Weiffenbach

James Field

Date: May 30, 1978

University of Colorado Museum Gallery, Boulder Colorado



"Anything that is used as art must be defined as art."¹

"The trouble with painting is not its inescapable illusionism per se. But this inherent illusionism brings with it a non-actual elusiveness or indeterminate allusiveness. The mode has become antique. Specifically, what is antique about it is the divisiveness of experience which marks on a flat surface elicit.... For a long while the duality of things and illusion sustained itself under the force of profuse organizational innovations within the work itself. But it has worn thin and the premises cease to convince. Duality of experience is not direct enough. That which has ambiguity built into it is not acceptable to an empirical and pragmatic outlook."²

ROBERT MORRIS, 1967

"All ideas are art if they are concerned with art and fall within the conventions of art."³

"When words such as painting and sculpture are used, they connote a whole tradition and imply a consequent acceptance of this tradition, thus placing limitations on the artist who would be reluctant to make art that goes beyond the limitations."⁴

SOL LEWITT, 1968

"As a communicative idiom, painting is exhausted. Art is the abstract distribution of information. The problem lies in the distribution. That is the core of the issue.... Tangible material is not, in art, the content but merely a vehicle. Distribution is mainly effectiveness in attacking consciousness and energizing it. Nowadays communications are only good when they are able to effect a change in consciousness. And communication is subservient to distribution."⁵

GREGORY BATTCKOCK, 1977

"I was interested in ideas--not merely visual information. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind."6

MARCEL DUCHAMP, 1920

The present installation in the University of Colorado Museum Gallery continues the exploration of materials/process found in my early work while reflecting recent concerns with conceptual and perceptual problems. The show involves materials/procedures, concepts/application/evaluation, and perception/experience/"meaning." The emphasis is on the value of each viewer's direct experience of actual space-time phenomena, the potential of perception to alter consciousness in both art and life, and the expansion of individual awareness and response.

The best way to describe my installation is in the terms in which the viewer perceives and experiences it when entering the gallery. Grey panels, 4' x 9' "sandwiches" of polyester batting sealed between two layers of fiberglass mesh, block the gallery entrance and must be directly handled, pushed aside. Once within the exhibition space per se, one is faced with more of the same. The walls are redefined as soft rather than solid by continuous panel-cover. These soft units fall randomly onto the floor and into the actual space of the room; viewer and art are thus established as equals through a similarity of size and the occupation of common ground. A grey, rectangular storage room occupies an 11' x 23' area in the middle of the gallery and prevents a wholistic view of the exhibition at all times.

I have approached art as an on-going process of exploration. Emphasis is placed on the art activity; art acts and individual response becomes more important than permanent art objects. Adopting a truth to material/truth to process attitude with my panels, I've presented the unique properties of unaltered physical substances as purely factual information. The panels are insistently self-referential, rather than symbolic or illusionistic, and reject subjective evaluation in terms of traditional aesthetic priorities. Both the mesh and the polyester batting are used in the form originally produced and supplied by the manufacturer. They are used as industrial "readymades"; my art "work" consisted of their selection rather than the craft of their actual making. Mesh and polyester batting are joined in an obvious and direct manner using glue with staples. The mesh is easily seen through, revealing both inside and outside simultaneously.

The form taken by each panel unit, all similar yet different, was dictated by the systematic interaction of materials and gravity. The making process has been "automated"; each form was determined by the laws of nature and the properties of the material rather than by any personal decision based on arbitrary aesthetic preference. This results in an unpredictable structure which, being obviously soft and mutable, has no permanent "object-value." The panels are dependent on their specific location and the duration of the exhibition for their transient existence as "art." "Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things is a positive assertion," Robert Morris insisted in 1968. "It is part of the work's refusal to continue estheticizing form by dealing with it as a prescribed end."⁷

Form is image, image is process. Ends and means are perceptibly fused, each panel being an impersonal product of situation and circumstance. The bulging grey rectangles are perceived in terms of our own bodily experience; they become kinesthetic equivalents for our postures of hanging, leaning, resting, and sagging. While visual and conceptual responses take place, one's body is also seduced. A literal use of materials and processes, the impermanent nature of the installation, and the physical intrusion of the panels into the viewer's space gives the work an unexpected sense of "presence." The viewer is faced with an experience which is objective and immediate rather than subjective and interpretive; "meaning" results from each individual's perception and response to materials and processes as they exist within the real time-space continuum of daily life.

Fluorescent lights, evenly placed along the top perimeter of the central storage room, help to realize John Cage's aesthetic philosophy of "unfocusing" the spectator's mind. "Theatre takes place all the time wherever one is and art simply facilitates persuading one this is the case," he insists.⁸ Rather than making art or music which is separate and closed, argues Cage, the artist should do something to make the spectator more aware and open to everything. Viewers and panels are treated as equals by the even emission of light. This helps, psychologically and physically, to break down the expected barrier between the individual and the art. One is thrown into an uncertain frame of mind--a necessary state for heightened awareness and inquiry to begin.

Conventional art values are thus reversed in order of importance: light is used to "unfocus" rather than focus; "making" processes have become fundamental while finished products are considered incidental and

irrelevant. Experimental music demonstrates a similar insistence on self-referential materials and processes, indeterminacy and chance, the elimination of differences between art and life, and immediate viewer response to events as they evolve in real time-space situations.

"New music; new listening. Not an attempt to understand something that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shape of words. Just an attention to the activity of sounds."⁹

JOHN CAGE

"A length of sound that is not involved in beginning or ending.... The music doesn't take note of itself. The piece goes on.... Duration becomes a function of attention, a focus, a physical act, a catalyst toward contemplating the present.... The objective content is never relinquished.... There are no commands, no directions, no theatrical gestures.... The notes refer only to themselves. The composer is not involved with pointing to himself or articulating his own emotions.... The listener is free to deal with the experience directly. As he so chooses. While the piece goes on."¹⁰

RUDOLF WURLITZER, 1969, "For Phillip Glass"

As the viewer physically experiences my installation the low threshold of change from panel to panel is overwhelmed by their ubiquitous repetition. All panels become equal in the sense that they are without hierarchy of rank, position, or meaning. This undifferentiated equality creates a feeling of bland neutrality--boredom serves as a stepping stone for the heightened awareness of self and surroundings. Andy Warhol, using silence in film and serial format in painting, exploits the banal and repetitious in just this manner: "When nothing happens, you have a chance to think about everything."¹¹

Such is the situation with my installation. There are no logically determined points of beginning, focus of interest, or termination. We are confronted with what Robert Morris defines as an "extended spatial experience" which has no clearly defined past or prescribed future.¹² I have deliberately used the storage room in the gallery's center to frustrate the formation of any single gestalt. The viewer must move through and around the exhibition space, experiencing the work behaviorally rather than merely imagistically. Everything becomes a "continuous present."¹³ It seems that there are more panels than can possibly be counted; the experience of endlessness is objectified and given concrete demonstration. We "know," rationally, that the work is contained within the exhibition space yet it gives the appearance of being boundless--theoretically infinite, never finished and without wholeness. The perception of this work necessarily exists in time as a function of duration and immediate experience.

This thesis statement has discussed only the "means" of my installation; "means" should not be confused with "meaning." The "art-of-it-all" is not to be found in the materials, processes, or physical aspects of the gallery space. Ultimately, the art/meaning rests with each individual's experience of the work and that individual's subjective response, heightened awareness and perception of self.

"To be an artist is not a matter of making paintings at all. What we are dealing with is our state of consciousness and the shape of our perception."¹⁴

ROBERT IRWIN, 1972

NOTES

¹ Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part III: Notes and Nonsequiturs," Artforum, Summer, 1967, pp. 24-29.

² Ibid.

³ Sol Le Witt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," Art-Language, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1969.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gregory Battcock. Why Art; Casual Notes on the Aesthetics of the Immediate Past (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1977), pp. 18-19.

⁶ Theodore Reff, "Duchamp and Leonards," Art In America, February, 1977, p. 82.

⁷ Robert Morris, "Anti-Form," Artforum, April, 1968, p. 35.

⁸ John Cage. Silence (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ James Monte and Marcia Tucker. Anti-Illusion: Procedures With Materials (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969), p. 14.

¹¹ David Bourdon, "Warhol as Filmmaker," Art in America, June, 1971, p. 49.

¹² Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space," Art in America, February, 1978, p. 70.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jan Butterfield, "The State of the Real: Robert Irwin Discusses the Activities of an Extended Consciousness," Arts Magazine, Summer, 1972, p. 48.

