

## GI symposium: Painting as a New Medium. John Calcutt

It's best not to automatically equate painting with art. Sometimes painting is simply painting, an innocent, art-free zone. Painting, in fact, often has to go through the agonies in order to turn itself into art. For the last hundred years and more this has involved painting being pretty hard on itself, ruthlessly stripping away all its unnecessary bits. Narrative, perspective, trompe l'œil effects, naturalistic forms - all those accumulated techniques of pictorial and allusion - became excess to requirements. Before it could be about anything else, painting had to be about itself. For Mondrian, painting was an exercise in pure plastic necessity: all right-angled grids and flat primary colours. For Malevich, it was a virulent attack upon the forms of nature: black square; black circle; black cross. But the more doggedly painters tried to discover the purified inner essence of their discipline, the more insistently it opened itself to the influence of external forces. Everything within it, they discovered, is reliant upon something beyond its apparent limits. Purity, originality, autonomy: they all turned out to be compromised ideas; convenient myths rather than absolute truths. Needless to say, there is a fairly long and complex history involved here, but in summarizing it Yves-Alain Bois concludes, "while the full realisation of the modernist program [of purification] would have theoretically signalled the end of painting, I don't have the slightest doubt that this very realisation is unobtainable." Despite an investment in a misconceived concept of its supposed inner necessity, painting-as-art survives - but at a cost. Continuing his reflections on avant garde practice in the second decade of the twentieth century, Bois writes,

During this period, the will not to compose - a deliberate downplaying of subjectivity - seems to be the product of an extreme anxiety: now that art is relieved from the constraints of mimetic representation, objective guidelines have been devised to avert the sheer triumph of arbitrariness and triviality.... Finally, this period also witnesses the first criticism of absolute non-compositionality as an unreachable goal: both Duchamp and Mondrian realise that the eradication of subjectivity is not so easy to achieve...

Frames: you could say that a lot of it comes down to frames. Mondrian drastically played down the role of the physical frame for his paintings - hoping thereby to encourage a free exchange between art and life - but they were nonetheless framed in other ways. A museum or art gallery is not merely a building; it is also a kind of frame, defining its contents: defining them, of course, as art. And, paradoxically, the more painting reduced itself, the more its identity as art came to depend upon the defining properties of the physical, conceptual and institutional frame of the gallery. It was this very realisation that caused Duchamp to abandon painting entirely and begin producing his readymades, forcing attention upon the fact that the gallery can endow the status of art even upon ordinary, mass produced objects.

In constructing small scale versions of Malevich's momentous Last Futurist Painting Exhibition (1915) and Mondrian's New York studio, David Alker and Peter Liddell simultaneously encapsulate this tragic history of avant garde painting's relation to the institution and rescue it in the name of a revised concept of art. If Malevich's paintings became the subject of the gallery - and if their status as art was to an uncomfortable degree dependent upon their enframing by gallery - the gallery (with Malevich's paintings) now becomes in turn the subject of Alker and Liddell's art. At first glance it may appear as if Alker and Liddell are thus engaged in a form of institutional critique not unlike that developed by various neo-avant-garde artists of the later 1960s in which the power of the gallery and its associated institutional apparatuses is challenged. There might be some truth in this, but only a partial truth. It is nevertheless useful to note certain similarities between the interests explored by Alker and Liddell in their reduced scale reproductions of Malevich's exhibition and Mondrian's studio, and the critical agenda of Daniel Buren. In 1971 Buren wrote an article entitled "The Function of the Studio" in which he articulated the intellectual premises upon which his own mode of institutional critique was founded:

Of all the frames, envelopes, and limits...which enclose and constitute the work of art (picture frame, niche, pedestal, palace, church, gallery, museum, art history, economics, power, etc.), there is one rarely even mentioned today that remains of primary importance: the artist's studio. Less dispensable to the artist than either the gallery or the museum, it precedes both. Moreover..., the museum and gallery on the one hand and the studio on the other are linked to form the foundation of the same edifice and the same system. To question one while leaving the other intact accomplishes nothing. Analysis of the art system must inevitably be carried on in

terms of the studio as the *unique space* of production and the museum as the *unique space* of exposition.

The studio, says Buren, is the only place where the work of art is really at home. But it is also a kind of boutique which curators and dealers visit in order to make their selections. Once these selections have been made, the work is transported to the museum or gallery where its "truth" and "reality" are lost. In the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris, Buren notes, Impressionist paintings are set into the salmon-coloured walls of the galleries, whereas in the Art Institute of Chicago, "paintings from the same period by the same artists are exhibited in elaborate carved frames, like onions in a row." When a museum or gallery brings together different works by different artists and exhibits them in the same space, we are forced - argues Buren - to draw one of the following two conclusions: either, "*all works of art are absolutely the same*" (for how else could we explain the fact that they are all arranged and exhibited in much the same way); or, "all works of art are absolutely different, and...every museum, every room in every museum, every wall and every square metre of every wall, is perfectly adapted to every work." Neither of these conclusions is satisfactory, but what can the artist do about it? Not a lot, according to Buren. The work of art is misrepresented in the gallery, but it is dead in the studio because no one ever really sees it there. Work produced in the studio has to take into account the fact that, if it is to be sold in order for the artist to earn money to live and carry on working, it must see the gallery - or some place other than the studio - as its inevitable destination. After dismissing the idea that the work of art is a purely internalised, self-referential affair which will not be affected by the conditions in which it is exhibited, Buren concludes that the only thing the artist can do is to imagine the *typical* space in which his (sic) work might end up:

The result is the predictable cubic space, uniformly lit, neutralized to the extreme, which characterizes the museum/gallery today. This state of affairs consciously or unconsciously compels the artist to banalize his own work in order to make it conform to the banality of the space that receives it.

By producing for a stereotype, one ends up of course fabricating a stereotype, which explains the rampant academicism of contemporary work...

Buren's own answer to this dilemma is to give up entirely the idea of producing work in the studio: "All my work," he declares, "proceeds from [the studio's] extinction."

As with all critical strategies, Buren's own 'anti-painting painting' practice has subsequently been recuperated by the very institution that is set out to attack, offering no suitable model for artists of a later generation, such as Alker and Liddell. Rather than confronting the 'system' by adopting an oppositional stance such as that of Buren, Alker and Liddell enter into it, repeating and restating its logic with minor - but significant - differences and modulations. There are many features of their work that could be developed here, but I will limit myself to a few words about models. Alker and Liddell have made models of Malevich's exhibition and Mondrian's studio. In so doing, they have converted places and situations into objects. These present objects that refer to absent places and situations are now themselves elements within new places and situations. It might not be stretching a point too far to suggest that in so doing Alker and Liddell have subjected the institutionalised aspects of painting (its site of production and its site of exhibition) to the logic of the Duchampian readymade - presenting them, that is to say, as recontextualised objects. Crucially, their reconstructions have also reduced the scale of their original referents. The fact that they deal with historical material is also absolutely significant. As the American sculptor Robert Morris observed in 1966:

It is obvious, yet important, to take note of the fact that things smaller than ourselves are seen differently from things larger. The quality of intimacy is attached to an object in a fairly direct proportion as its size diminishes in relation to oneself. The quality of publicness is attached in proportion as the size increases in relation to oneself.

Thus the reduced scale of an object secures it more firmly to the realm of private experience and, as Susan Smith notes, "We find the miniature at the origin of private, individual history...." In other words, through this reduction of scale Alker and Liddell suggest that the kind of shared, public notion of universal history upon which the works of Malevich and Mondrian depended utterly for their utopian aspirations has now been displaced by a kind of privatised, solipsistic view of historical value. Thus the construct of historical time upon which

the gallery and museum are predicated is contradicted from within and its own internal contradictions gradually become apparent. For this construct of time wishes to be both historical ('significant' works of art evolve out of each other in a sequence of linear progression) and *timeless* (the exemplary aesthetic experience, in the words of the modernist critic Michael Fried, "has no duration"). This unresolved relation between the different temporal demands of public and private experiences of art is not the only paradox of modern art's ideological legacy to be exposed by Alker and Liddell. Reduction of scale, as we have suggested, increases the senses of intimacy and privacy. Intimacy and privacy also provide the optimum conditions under which aesthetic contemplation of the work of art may take place. Private contemplation, in fact, was at the origin of the transcendental claims made by the avant garde on behalf of the aesthetic experience (in terms of both the production and reception of art). In the case of Alker and Liddell's models of Malevich's exhibition and Mondrian's studio, however, a relation of intimacy has been staged only to be thwarted. Despite the ideal viewing conditions there is, so to speak, nothing to contemplate: there is only the abstracted, blank scene of looking itself. In re-presenting episodes from the history of the avant garde's attack upon representation (i.e. seminal moments within the development of modernist 'abstract' painting), Alker and Liddell highlight the problematic conditions surrounding contemporary painting. Rather than being fully present, painting functions in these works as a referent, something accessible only indirectly. Despite its centrality as a concept, it is physically and materially absent. And yet this absence does not indicate the triumph of some spiritual or other form of transcendence. Yves Klein perceived "an insoluble problem of spatial organization" in "the beautiful and grandiose, but dramatic adventure of Malevich or Mondrian". This problem, according to Klein, involved the use of line to divide the pictorial surface into different areas of colour so that "one can no longer plunge into the sensibility of pure colour, relieved from all outside contamination." In his own work, he claimed, "it is through colour that I have little by little become acquainted with the Immaterial." Blue, in particular, suited Klein's demand for an aesthetic sensation of undefined spatiality and temporality, thus on 28 April 1958 he presented *La Vide* at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris. "The Galerie Iris Clert is a very small room, it has a show window and an entrance on the street. We will close the street entrance and make the public enter through the lobby of the building. From the street it will be impossible to see anything but Blue, because I will paint the window glass with blue. The canopy will be Blue too." The exhibition was to be "in actuality a space of Blue sensibility in the frame of the whitened walls of the gallery." As his statement makes clear, Klein's blue "void" of liberating immateriality was, of course, inadvertently but utterly dependent upon the confining frame of the gallery itself. His desire to project painting beyond its physical limits and into "a pictorial quest for an ecstatic and immediately communicable emotion" - a realm of pure pictorial sensitivity - was as unfulfilled as those other desires of Malevich and Mondrian. Divorced from us in time and space, all that remains to us of these ambitious but ultimately flawed projects are some grainy black and white photographs. From these ghostly documents Alker and Liddell are able to reconstruct models and images that critically redefine the past in a gesture that simultaneously helps us better understand the present.