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Architecture and photographic framing: Re-framing the building fragment in its context, and the body in a program of use

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ARCHITECTURE AND PHOTOGRAPHIC FRAMING: RE-FRAMING THE BUILDING FRAGMENT IN ITS CONTEXT, AND THE BODY IN A PROGRAM OF USE

by

V. MASON WICKHAM

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

Architecture and Photographic Framing: Re-framing the Building Fragment in its Context and the Body in a Program of Use

by

V. Mason Wickham

This thesis explores the phenomenon of contingency inherent in photographic framing for its application to the design of a public building in an urban context. Like the conception of any duality, as stated by Roland Barthes in his essay *Camera Lucida*; a photograph exists only in terms of our perception of its frame. This project demonstrates these principles as they are examined in the images of Brassai's Paris, the work of Daniel Buren, and the *Untitled Film Stills* of Cindy Sherman through the design of a post office in Houston, Texas. The city, the site, the building and the program extend beyond the bounded limits of pure enclosure; and the architecture becomes an inhabitable frame in which the referent adheres to the reference, the fragment to the context, the object to the subject.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

THE SOVEREIGN CONTINGENCY: ROLAND BARTHÈS PHOTOGRAPHY

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes that photography is the sovereign contingency:

"It is as if photography always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb like the condemned man and the corpse...The photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: good and evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive..."¹

The intention of this thesis is to establish the relationship between photographic framing (as described by Roland Barthes) and architecture by manipulating and articulating the perception of boundaries that separate the building fragment from its urban context, and the body from the building's program of use. Barthes states in the quote above that a photograph contains dualities we can conceive but not perceive. Perhaps that is to say that the perception of distinct entities only really occurs manifested in the boundary that separates them. This boundary operates in the way the frame of a photograph references a single

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image to a visual field, a fragment to its context, an inside to an outside, an object to a subject, and of course the photograph to the photographer. Photographic framing therefore is a threshold that contains what has been excluded as well as included.
CHAPTER 2
RE-FRAMING PARIS: BRASSAI'S URBAN FRAGMENTS

Pre W.W.I photography in Paris appears in the form of a tourist album. It is a clear vision of consensus, of an order of monuments, a static portrait of Baron Haussmann's city. Each photograph is a record of information as independent and complete within its frame as is possible given the nature of photography. It is conceived as a single record in an index of spatial images; they are pictorial maps sequentially arranged for the visual reconstruction in the mind of a model of the city in what was called the Paris Atlas.

However, W.W.I helped to destroy this vision. Europe was physically and psychologically shattered leaving broken notions of social, political and urban order behind. The photograph develops at this time away from its object nature described above, and into a self-conscious operation of framing. The work of several photographers re-assembled a new Paris from the vestiges of an old city with this different kind of photograph. Photographs of fragments, a disjunctive fabric of isolated details, un-idealized subject matter, random individuals, and subjective experience, reflected the internal order of a 'living' city and the path for its reconstruction. Depicted is not a city of disarray, but the foreshadowing of a form the 20th century city would take; a new representation of urban imagery through a new representation of order. The city shifts from a comprehensive object to something "...sprawling, vibrant, complex and an ultimately mysterious phenomenon, one composed...of moments, interactions, juxtapositions, oppositions."1 The photograph shifts from

a static ‘urban portrait’ to something that reveals references and relationships that had not previously been seen.

Brassai’s Paris is the perception of hidden relationships that are obscured by “cultural consensus”, and isolated in a formal understanding of Paris as their context. It is the study of what at first appears to be urban fragments denied meaningful reference elements by the boundaries, the frame, of a contained secondary visual field, the photographic image. However this condition, at the heart of Brassai’s work and perhaps all photography, contains a reciprocal condition. Although the separation of entities can be conceived, it is ultimately perceived as a boundary, or frame, of reference.

A photograph is the act of framing. It is first the process of isolating a fragment of information from a larger context of information. The medium of photography is by its simplest definition a brutal act of isolating. The photograph forces the viewer into a synthetic relationship with a replication, a facsimile of the “real”, of a two-dimensional representation of reality. Making a photograph involves choosing a subject, locating the viewer, and establishing the domain of the observed. Yet the boundaries of these relationships are dynamic; ultimately, bound to these framing decisions is a reference to what has been excluded. The elimination of reference material within a visual field is therefore completely dependent on its reference to material without that field.
CHAPTER 3

FRAMING CONTINGENCY: THE ART OF DANIEL BUREN

Much of the work of Daniel Buren is composed with two devices: the almost exclusive use of 8.7 cm wide, vertical, alternating colored and white striped surfaces; and their specific application *in situ*. This striped medium, in which the content (the represented subject of traditional painting) has been almost entirely removed, has a strong yet solitary presence. But as an isolated object (specifically an art object) this element has no intentional significance beyond itself.

**sin-gu-lar-i-ty** \ sinj-gye-lar-et-\n, pl-ties

something that is singular: as a separate unit b: unusual or distinctive manner or behavior : PECULIARITY 2: the quality or state of being singular, or having oneness 3: a point at which the derivative of a given function of a complex set of variables does not exist...

The work *in situ* is the situation, or circumstances, surrounding the location and application of Buren's stripes which are as diverse as an art gallery and the Illinois countryside. It is an integrated notion of context and medium, which is internal to the work and inseparable from Buren's conception of art.

**con-text** \ kan-tekst \n [ME coherence, fr. contextus, pp. of contextere to weave together, fr. com-+texere to weave] 1: the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and that can throw light on its meaning 2: the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs : ENVIRONMENT
Therefore the singularity of the art is denied and its object is contextualized. Infinite relationships are activated through the striped medium and its designation in discourse with the world from which it is produced and displayed; and the total work of art is formed. For Buren, concepts of the self-referential and the autonomous nature of an entity is a fallacy; and the true existence of a thing is really the testimony for the existence of a world of things.¹

**CONTINGENCY** (ken tin jen se), n., pl. -cies 1. dependence on chance or on the fulfillment of a condition. 2. an uncertain event; chance; possibility; He was prepared for every contingency. 3. something incidental. 4. re: logic (of a proposition) neither logically necessary not logically impossible. 5. anyone of the representative groups composing an assemblage. [contin-g(ent)+-ency]

¹ *Collage Sauvage*, October 1970, work *in situ*, New York City. *Collage Sauvage* consists of a rectangular, bright magenta and white, striped canvass installed into the muted context of a decaying street facade. It perfectly obscures one of three glass openings in a tenement storefront creating a tense but binding juxtaposition of complimentary and dissonant information. The striped panel (though radically different in much of its character) activates a dynamic field of reference relative to the metaphysical and formal properties of these two adjacent windows, and consequently the entire street elevation. From perhaps a first reading (a flattened one) in which this visual element has an affinity to its context, the installation is merely a window awning. But beyond this reading in terms of a metaphysical relationship, these dull windows and bold stripes resonate together in their urban context. The glass openings which are transparencies that accommodate the overlap of street and store, and Buren's installation although it ironically conceals the third of these openings, both demonstrate an ability to reference material outside of itself, to function as a threshold. Both elements are an expressed intersection that, while marking a difference, simultaneously connects two or more separate worlds. However, visual references provoked by Buren's panel are not phenomenal but formal resonances. The affinities occur between the shape, size and location of the striped canvass and the window openings which bind the intervention to the existing building facade.
In his work, Buren manipulates a revised application of pure painting (the medium in which he was trained) to achieve the results of certain framing phenomena specific to photography. For Buren the limitations of the institutional framework in which conventional painting is consumed and the medium itself must be critically examined, literally re-framed. The art institution is an exclusive framing device which divides “art” from “non-art” to then further distinguish its production from its public exhibition. In the same reductive spirit of its definition and display; the medium itself frames by containing an interpretation of, but not actively referencing, the world from which it is made. It maintains what Walter Benjamin calls in his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, a “...natural distance from reality...” unlike photography and film through which “...the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.” A painting is a self-sufficient artifact that ultimately refers nowhere more forcefully than back to itself. The photograph, on the other hand, is bound by its referential nature and does not have the power of sufficiency found in the crafted object. Instead it is the function of an operation, an act of framing. A photograph is the visual documentation of existing conditions in fragments whose boundaries refer to what has been both included and excluded in an image. In other words the contents of an image (the reference) is the indelible imprint of its context (the referent) or everything outside of that image. Through the literal and phenomenal collapsing and re-collapsing of the boundaries between two realms of institutional art (its display and production) and by recontextualizing the art object, Buren explores this framing phenomenon in four general strategies without the use of a camera. First he directly challenges framing as an act of pure enclosure through re-framing conventional relationships established by windows, building walls (specifically those used as institutional frames like museums and galleries) and doors. Second, Buren
explores a concept of resonances, which are visual references (affinities and repulsions) that occur between the striped medium and its contextual circumstances, that also deny a static application of frame to fix the parameters of the work of art. Third, he tests concepts of transparency (the simultaneous existence of one or more entities in the same space/time producing multiple perceptions of a single work) to demonstrate a property of dynamic framing that while it defines boundaries, it references extension (multiple readings) destroying a fixed notion of framed limits. Lastly, the actual composition of stripes themselves resist their sole delineation as art object, frame or context, and the results of static framing are again denied.

The conventional treatment of painting as a fine art which involves the recognition, the critical evaluation and the display of the art object as a reference to itself and an accepted context for public exhibition, is a static frame. The art object is conceived into a context of Art by its own institutions; it is an art that references art. It is the production of reductive definitions and canonical interpretations (what is inside and outside of the accepted realm of Art) by naming the critical and physical context of the work to be museums and galleries. To ignore a broader context of reference (a compulsory presence in the photograph) is to view an object or an image in a kind of isolation, as though it existed autonomously within a frame without referents. Buren, however,

\footnote{Door at the Appollinaire Gallery, 1968, Appollinaire Gallery, Milan. In an exhibition of his work at the Appollinaire Gallery, Buren adhered green and white striped material on to the outside of the gallery door. Using the door as the striped element of the designates the door itself a phenomenal frame. The domain of the total work is literally located on the outside of the gallery, and therefore occupies both the realm inside and outside of the art institution. It is no accident that Buren stripes the door to activate the total work. Doors are frames that separate and also connect two or more spaces at one time. Its threshold is the space of the phenomenal frame in which two spaces make a third space from their overlap. What is inside of the acceptable realm of art (the gallery space which conventionally contains it) and what is outside of that realm intersect at Buren's work.}
challenges the repression of this reference to embrace what is contingent in the world to his work. He re-frames the status of art (the solitary object) as defined within the limited definitions established in art institutions by re-engaging his work with specific sites.\(^3\)

Not only the institutionalization of art, but the medium of conventional painting itself is a static frame in which the concept of photographic framing is suppressed. This is due in part to the fact that painting is a totally contrived medium bound by its object nature. A painting is the manipulation of the artist’s imagination. But before it is a tree or a bowl of fruit, it has as its essence something physical, paint. Unlike a photograph, the contents of a painting are invented; the referent can never be presumed to have existed. It is in most instances a crafted object in which even the most life-like re-creations, some of which that have actually existed, are invented. They are, at the distance of the imagination, the product of some time and labor which has a density that overwhelms the realm of what it references. This fact produces inert boundaries between the art work and its context of reference, and an internal weightiness that determines the object nature of the painting. Also

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\(^3\) *Une Enveloppe Peut En Cacher Une Autre*, 1989, Musee Rath, Geneva; photos by Egon Von Furstenburg.

*Une Enveloppe Peut En Cacher Une Autre* creates unstable boundaries between inside and out. Buren radicalizes the territory of the work of art relative to the museum’s domain. An exterior envelope of black and white canvas walls, that reveals while it simultaneously encloses the Musee Rath in its context, places the work of art (traditionally found on the inside of the institutional building) on the outside of its intended container. The work is continuous, in a dynamic relationship with this envelope, with another construction on the inside of the museum through the memory of the visitor who experiences the exhibit. Striped canvas walls called *exploded cabins* simultaneously act as the contents or the inside of the exhibition and its outside or container. The *exploded cabins* configure the intersections of overlapping spaces inside the room of the exhibition in order to exercise the denial of the art, in its exhibition, as a non-interactive object separate from the world and contained within the museum. Space is used instead to demonstrate enclosure without the designation of the fixed relationships of inside and outside.
because its execution requires the re-creation of subject matter concentrated within prescribed boundaries, the painting begins as an object with a fixed notion of frame (any surface on which the paint is to be applied) defined by a surface area and perimeter. The strength of this object (reference) weakens an acknowledgment of a subject (referent) beyond the signifier. Therefore the reference is framed in virtual isolation, at a debilitating distance, from its referent. The work, therefore, is more self-referential in its weakened relationship to the realm that is outside of its domain. A painting makes a world for itself perhaps out of the world in which it exists; but it ultimately stands alone in spite of it.

On the other hand, unlike painting, a photograph is the mechanical reproduction of a fragment of existing context articulated less as an object and more as an act of framing. In a sense the medium itself is invisible due to the jurisdiction of its contents which extend beyond the physical artifact. The photograph is what is residual to operating a machine (a camera); it is an act of framing (not the results of artistic re-creation), the decisions involving which visual fragments in the world to record and which ones to omit. It is essentially a record of these choices which bind the image (the reference) to the context (referent). Finally because this material has presumably existed, which can not be assumed of painting, these operations of photographic framing even more strongly adhere the referent to the reference, and the contents of the image are inseparable from its context of reference. In other words, the referent is irrevocably attached to its reference in a dynamic relationship that overwhelms the presence of the photographic medium. Therefore the photograph does not exist as an autonomous object in the way a painting does; it is a symbiotic operation, a function of framing. What is distinguished inside of the literal boundaries of the framed photograph suggests a continuous fabric of
information that extends and relies on what is outside of it. Consequently the photograph, unlike the crafted nature of the painting, manifests the influence of accidents and the random contribution of contingencies for its success. It is the record of the distinction, not the brutal capture, of some small piece of circumstance that engages, not disembodies, the world around it with the frame. This framing is compulsory in photography; it automatically implicates the context from which the photograph is a detail or the evidence advertising a broader body of information for which the document is merely a sign. It can manifest and reference the expression of desire, or the revelation of an agenda. An understanding, a definition, a delineation of the framed image therefore becomes impossible without the evocation of reference beyond its declared subject matter.4

With the application of this model of photographic framing, Buren dismantles the estranged territories of the display of art and its production

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4 Watch the Doors Please, 1980-82, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. Watch the Doors Please is many works that operate as one, like Une Enveloppe for example, in more than one location. Its domain is determined both by the things that it is and the things that it is not, collapsing any notion of a fixed territory of inside and out. Although Watch the Doors Please and Une Enveloppe extend their dimensions beyond the immediate contexts of works like Collage Sauvage, Watch the Doors Please involves an even more extensive factor of space and time. In this project Buren laminates different striped, weatherproof canvases to the exterior doors of each of the 165 train cars on an active rail line. The striped doors of this suburban commuter service, originating directly underneath the Art Institute of Chicago, could be seen simultaneously by individuals in different spatial contexts. The exhibition takes place on the railway platform and in the gallery, inside and outside of the institution, while the separate domains of observers exist simultaneously through the arrival of the trains. The project therefore engages an infinite combination of circumstances surrounding the coincidental location of the Institute and the train line, the contingent sequence of cars determined by the rail yard and the incidents of their travel. When the trains are running, these combinations of doors move through space like flashes of color that appear and disappear threading the city’s skyline with the suburban landscape to frame the total work.
through the re-contextualization of the object by employing at least four techniques. His installations explore this framing phenomenally by radicalizing the literal application of frame. Through the experimentation with a variety of different striped surfaces (a revised notion of the canvass borrowed from painting) used not as the object of his work nor as its binding frame, Buren activates a new concept of frame through the relationships (references) it generates with a context. This application in situ, which is the total work, produces a challenging reading of what is simultaneously designated the interior and the exterior domains of the work of art.

The first of these strategies involves Buren’s manipulation of conventional building elements (windows, walls and doors), the devices that literally frame our world. The work often involves the actual striping of window and door panels denying their literal functions as openings, but accentuating their conceptual importance as thresholds. The threshold is important to Buren because it is the transparent imbetween where two distinct spaces exist simultaneously, reflective of one another. It is the zone in which the designation of inside and outside is clearly relative. Other examples include, not the appropriation of these openings, but a juxtaposition to them. The configuration of stripes produces, in these cases, an affinity or confrontation with an adjacent door or window and its context to stimulate an examination of function, of what is being separated and what is being connected. Lastly Buren manipulates a notion of institutional building as frame (specifically those that contain art) in many cases by reversing the standard expectations of what is contained by a frame and what is not. Included in these displacements is also the displacement of the frame itself since the they (in most cases museum or the gallery buildings) are used as an integral part of the work.
Resonances are visual vibrations that act as conduits to connect different contextual elements through (and with) Buren’s striped surfaces. It is a medium of reference which breaks down existing barriers, created by the reductive tendency of perception, between separate yet contingent entities. These entities dynamically reference the existence of one to the other, though activating like or even unlike properties, and bind them in a reflective relationship; the identity of one becomes affiliated, and in some cases dependent, on the identity of the other. These resonances are in a sense reflective inducing the simultaneous perception of separate entities in a form of transparency. Here the formal boundaries of an entity are violated and the object is subsumed into a non-heirarchical relationship with its context. The frame (the distinction between intervention and context) is no longer a means of enclosure, but becomes a frame of reference. The minds eye converts distinct conditions into the shared circumstances of a dynamic intersection.\(^5\)

This dynamic intersection in which two or more distinct entities preserve their individual properties (not their autonomy), and yet exist simultaneously in the same space/time, describes a condition of transparency mentioned briefly in the two paragraphs directly above. Buren’s reframing

\(^5\) *Permutations: 7 Days - 6 Replacements - 7 Colors*, 1973, work in situ, Halifax, Nova Scotia. *Permutations* is a play on the idea of window and frame as well as the demonstration of phenomenal framing that re-activates its opaque context. Six striped elements are installed on the structural pilasters of an abandon building’s facade. While the verticality of the stripes resonate with the vertical forces of the columns, their playful quality only frames the load bearing nature of these piers. Yet adjacent to these structural elements are five bays of windows blocked-up previous to the installation. The window frame is a devise through which the separation between two or more realms (in this case private and public, inside and out) is demarcated and yet undermined. It is a territory of transparency where two places are connected, not separated, to exist simultaneously. Buren’s stripes, the approximate dimensions of the sealed window opening, seem to phenomenally re-open for the building this denied transparency.
strategy is the conceptual reframing of window, building and door in terms that suggest, in some cases enhance, but only begin to manipulate this very physical and literal realization of transparency as threshold. However, later experimentation involves the use of walls and openings that more directly engages space extending the inhabitable dimensions of a transparent realm. A wall dividing two spaces and bisected by an opening is vertically striped on the right half only. The floors, ceilings and the back walls (directly opposite from the opening) of these rooms are also striped in this way producing an ineffective separation of spaces when viewed through the opening. Although each room is spatially well-delineated, it is perceived simultaneously with the other (not separated) through the framed opening; and the project is an exploded threshold, not on the scale of a door jamb, but on the scale of a pavilion. Resonances create a more difficult situation in which to perceive this simultaneity. They are visual cues referencing separate entities that in a phenomenal way reflect one another. These reflections are a dependency that results from acknowledged relationships (references) in which a single entity can no longer be described in terms of just itself; the terms on which it exists is symbiotic with the terms on which its contingent entities exist producing a transparent condition in the mind's eye.6

6 Meurtiere (detail), June 1982, work in situ, Muro Aureliano, Rome. The Meurtiere shown in the photographic documentation of the work is merely a fragment that references the total work. The presentation of the project as a detail that has been cut from a larger context reflects Buren's interest in photographic framing. Within the limited information of the image provided, the striped walls and floor act literally as a canvass (a frame) that references information outside of the photograph. Patterns from cast shadows of unknown objects and sources of light appear on the semi-transparent material of these surfaces, reflected through them or cast from behind them. The result is the perceived overlap in the territory of their intersection where the dominion of what is being framed is not confined in space or time. The surface also has a small square opening disclosing an organic image of patterns not unlike, though at a slightly different scale, the suggestions made by the shadows. This
Finally, these striped elements, whose extreme vertical edges (side edges) are reserved exclusively for the color white, suggest an absence or a dissolving of conventional frame specifically for the striped elements, as well as the total work. The distinction of inside to outside becomes simultaneous and transparent through an attempt to deny an effective boundary between the stripes and their contexts. In perhaps another reading, the white stripe is not an absence (in this case of color) but a presence equal to the colored stripes. Yet the equal width and repetition of these striped elements regardless of their color automatically destroys the relevance of establishing a boundary condition that contains the contents of a composition. In effect, the striped elements themselves become a frame that functions as a referencing device that is the measure of what is around it. The horizontal edges (top and bottom edges) are in a sense broken or unclosed. They are the alternating ends of the colored and white stripes whose directionality is greater than the physical limits of the composition. The striped element then becomes an unfixed territory between itself and its context that acts as a conductor, transforming the notion of frame. It does not become something that separates and contains; but that reveals the intersection of relationships. It is dependent not autonomous, inclusive not editorial, referential not isolated.

"Right from the start I have always tried to show...that indeed a thing never exists in itself."7

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CHAPTER 4
FRAMING AS REFERENCE: CINDY SHERMAN'S UNTITLED FILM STILLS

Cindy Sherman borrows the structure and conventional content of the film still as a vehicle for examining the relationship of culture, image and the construction of identity. In this genre, associated almost exclusively with the American B-grade movie, an ingenue is featured framed in a single photographic image. In almost a hundred frames, a body of work entitled "Untitled Film Stills" created for fictional films, Sherman is the leading lady. She is the model for stills she invents out of B-movie myths in a critique of culture and identity.¹

¹ In almost a hundred photographs of herself, Cindy Sherman creates fictional film stills depicting solitary women framed in the circumstances of the film's narrative. These images specifically evoke a cultural generation of American B-grade movie still in which the single women represented portrays a leading actress playing the role of a woman. They are generic feminine portraits that convey filmic roles about role playing that operate from and into Sherman's and our own cultural imaginations. Through the impact of collective feminine imagery (the accumulated effects of dominant culture revealed in film, television and advertising) on her ego, she projects the complex circumstances of identity.

The film still as the represented contents of her work is significant relative to its allusion to the B-movie. The B-grade movie, according to Sherman, frames the relationship of culture and the cultural imagination. It becomes the vehicle for the reference of one to the other through which the dilemma of authorship (which is the reference and which is its referent) is addressed. Considering that Sherman's stills represent fragments of films that do not exist, that they are isolated referents whose only reference is through our cultural imaginations; "Untitled Film Stills" are the record of a simultaneous imprint. They are a reflective operation in which film is an imprint of culture and culture, having evolved into a cultural imagination, is an imprint of film.

The identification of culture through film and simultaneously the identification of film through culture eventually implicates the structure of personal identity. Culture (and its imagination), and film is an imprint of the collective identification of the individual through the use of chosen images, crafted stereotypes and roles. In the same way an individual's identity is also an imprint of this collective
Yet it is the structure of the film still format and its photographic mediums that Sherman manipulates in addition to a critical reiteration of its B-movie contents. She demonstrates a phenomenon of reference, inherent to framing in photography, that produces a reflected realm. The film still is a photograph that references a frozen film frame that references a film that, because it is fictional, references what exists. By being photographer and model for these stills, Sherman demonstrates that the image strongly references the operation of framing; that the work of art references its creator, and the object references its subject. Yet the results of this self portraiture, manifest a condition inherent to all photographs. The act of photographic framing, is not the removal and subsequent isolation of an entity from its field of reference, but the record of their intersection. The realm of the image and the realm of what is outside of it reference and effectively reflect each other through their simultaneous projection in the phenomenally transparent space of the frame.

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cultural consensus. The heel and pointed toe that kicks up behind a woman who embraces her leading man is not a nervous reflex of all feminine knees. Its filmic debut spawned the one-legged kiss.

The idea of personal identity as a product and agent of the imprint extends further in Sherman’s work to include an idea of ego, or original identity. Enforced by the fact that Sherman is the model for all of these portraits suggests a concept of identity not as essence but as imprint. Not only are the complex circumstances of personal identity the reference and referent of culture; but media generated culture is at the core of the individual. The ego itself is not an essence but an imprint as well. By being the artist or author and simultaneously the model, not of herself but of multiple actresses who themselves are the models for actual characters that portray women, Sherman lends the work to an examination of identity and the question of multiple versus one essential self.

The actual structure of the film still format, is also a model for the reflective relationships described in the contents above. In the same way the delineation of individual identity is irrevocably dependent on the delineation of culture, the film still is a reference. This fictional film frame references a fictional film located somewhere in our cultural imaginations. The actual women in the stills, all portrayed by Sherman, reference actresses, the actresses reference fictional characters, the characters reference generic feminine portraits, these portraits reference actual women in American society.
The structure of the film still is a complimentary model that enforces Sherman's ideas about the reflective properties of reference. Its format is structured around the nesting of photographic mediums. The film still is a photograph of a frozen fragment of the entire action of a film. It is an isolated moment in a narrative represented by a single frame from out of the dozens of frames in a movie reel. In Sherman's application of this format, her photographs suggest the film frames of mythical film stills. They reference film frames from fictional films. But because the films themselves never existed, the stills make final reference not to themselves, but back to a whole genre of B-grade movies.  

Sherman enforces the coincidence of the subjective gaze with the object of that gaze, the collapse of the boundaries of the subject into the boundaries of the object, through her use of what is essentially unconventional photographic self-portraiture. Although her photographs of fictional film frames automatically achieve a certain unity with their medium (a film still is a photograph of a frozen movie frame); the camera becomes internal to these works again by disrupting the formal boundaries that separate the viewer who operates the camera from objects viewed and framed within the photographic

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2 This catalogue of images also suggests two models of the structure of feminine identity. Not unlike the relationships operating within these film stills (photographs reference photographs, photographs reference film frames, film frames reference films) actual women reference fictional characters, fictional characters reference generic feminine portraits. The role of Sherman portraying an actress playing a woman is no more or less a representation of a woman playing herself. The way in which an audience watches an actress performing is not unlike the way in which society sees her. This phenomenon of identity as articulated by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* occurs significantly in women. A woman is first identified in society by the way in which she appears; men by what they have the power to do. Simply stated: men act; women appear. A women's identity is then a coincidence of relationships that function as distinct, but in a state of reference to one another. She is an entity whose identity is the expressed condition of two separate but simultaneous phenomenon; one of being, the other of appearing. The way in which society watches her is not unlike the way she comes to watch herself.
image. Valezquez in "Las Meninas" paints the complex and reflective relationship of subject to object framed inside and outside of his painting. The subject of the painting is Queen Isabella and Philip IV of Spain with the apparent subject of the painting (the object of their gaze) the infanta Margarita and her surrounding attendants. The artist, by literally occupying the left edge of the painting (he represents himself frontally partially obscured by an easel) becomes the frame suggesting a revised relationship between the painter and the painting. The Monarchy appears more subtly as a reflection in a small oval mirror on a back wall of the painting. They view the scene (as does Valezquez) both from inside and outside of the painting becoming the frame, and creating an unstable territory between the two domains of their intersection.

Valezquez and Sherman invent and then attempt to occupy a space where the subject is simultaneously the object form it takes. As artist, as photographer, as subject, Sherman carefully produces these images through the manipulation of a single female figure within a variety of contrived spaces and the total work is carefully designated by her calculated imposition of a frame. From outside of the frame she directs, creates and then frames a domain that contains the contents of these images. But simultaneously Sherman is the model for the images, the framed contents of the photograph, an object among other objects that is devised and set into place. From inside of the frame she recreates and reflects a domain outside of it. Because she is the subject and the object of the action outside and inside of herself, within and without of the confines of the frame; the territory of these two

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3 Berger then describes a satellite phenomenon of feminine identity in which women are not only watched, are engaged in a condition of appearing to others, they are also confined in the act of watching themselves. The established boundaries of who she is evolve; and her identity becomes a complex, dynamic intersection at the division of self and the appearance of self, of watching and being watched, of being subject and being object.
domains becomes reflective and inseparable. Both for Valezquez and Sherman this is a significantly revised understanding of subject and object into a symbiotic structure. The two of them no longer exist as autonomous entities in a pair, but as conceptually interdependent phenomenon. The boundaries of each reiterate not only itself but the characteristics of the other. The definition of one implicates the definition of the other. Their reflective and simultaneous existence in the space of their framing is a condition of phenomenal transparency.

Therefore Sherman's film stills demonstrate the dynamic reference of subject and object through the manipulation of the process of taking photographs. But it is crucial to recognize this condition is also internal to the phenomenon of photography. The camera's framing operations are perhaps first a function of separation; a fragment is isolated, removed from a greater body of fragments and contained. Photographs in this sense are fragments themselves; they are disembodied pieces of reality. But Sherman's photographs reframe these formerly determined relationships of what is inside of the contents of the framed image and what is outside of them in a third territory. The domain of the frame itself is the phenomenal place of the intersection of the realm of the image and the realm outside of it. This intersection is the simultaneous projection of two distinct places producing the oscillating territory in which they truly exist. It is here that she presents a critical examination of the relationship of referent to reference. Not unlike the relationship of object to subject, the framed image does not exist autonomously but as an indication of itself relative to what is outside of itself. Not unique to photographic images, but definitely one of their strongest qualities is the density they have outside of their framed contents. They reference a context of information in a relationship fusing inside to out. This is a second operation of
framing which is the defining or delineating through articulating boundaries not
as separation but as the expressed intersection of what is external as well as
internal to themselves. The total photograph is a function of the frame that
conducts the relationship between the image produced, and the world outside
of it.

An examination of photographic space (interior and exterior, urban
and natural) and its relationship to the women in the film stills demonstrates
Sherman's experimentation with framing. These images, carefully framed at a
variety of distances and camera angles establishes the existence of three
domains and the different values Sherman assigns to them. Two domains are
designated separately for the inside and outside of the frame. A third domain
reveals the phenomenon of how they exist simultaneously. In conjunction with
framing, a number of devices which include the manipulation of objects,
textures, light, windows, doors, mirrors, shadows and reflections, these specific
domains are established and disrupted.

One domain is the actual space delineated inside of the frame
which is closed and coercive where the women in the photographs seem to
dwell in suspended animation.4 The space of the image is a confined territory
that houses the object for viewing. Yet this space, inert and object-like, is
activated with tension. The photographs all have a heightened presence, a
sense of being looked at from outside of them as strong as the projected images
themselves. The different ways in which the women in the photographs
personally direct themselves relative to the frame not only describes them as
the watched, but suggests what is outside of them watching. Almost all of the

4 Sherman's constructed spaces and frames act as cages or display
cases which implicate male desire and its monopoly of subject status, and
simultaneously suggests a reciprocal phenomenon of object status for the
female.
film stills avoid confrontation with the camera. Still #7, for example, stares back aggressively but with the protection of sun glasses; and # 17 looks back out of sheer naïveté. But more frequently these women look sharply sideways or up, but almost always away from the focus of the camera. The more indirectly the eyes of the women address the space of the camera by focusing away or inwardly, the stronger the content outside of them becomes. (see still #6 & #11) A diminished presence within the frame is directly proportional to the expression of detachment and the strength of this presence outside of the frame. This domain is the territory that includes everything outside of the frame; an imagined space of agency that correlates with some outside reality beyond yet inseparable from the images. This space is the exclusive territory of an absent presence that is powerful. The final domain houses the forces that pull the eye into the photographs and back out again that dissolves pure boundaries and activates the entity and the context into one another. This is the domain of the frame which references the space that is inside and outside of itself to the extent that the two act inseparably. It is a shifting space of phenomenal overlap where two spaces act interdependently in the act of compulsively describe each other.

In film still #2 the space of the entire photograph is literally restricted with an actual frame making the boundaries that suggest a space of containment. The jamb of a door opening forcefully frames the space of a woman in a bath room self-consciously separating it from the space of the watcher outside. The curtains and sliding glass door frames of still # 7 frame

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5 This extremely imposing presence that is always outside of the framed domain of the women in the photographs can be identified with the controlling gaze of male dominated culture in which women are understood and understand themselves by being carefully watched. The diminished presence within the frame suggests the disempowerment that results from surveillance.
the dark space of a bedroom from which a woman appears. The brightly lit slice of space of what appears to be part of a patio in the foreground suggests the domain of the voyeur outside of the image. Literal framing can also occur within the space of the framed image through the use of door and window frames. The door frame of still # 4 in which a woman leans suggests a realm beyond her, and the window frame of still # 15 in which a woman sits visually joins and simultaneously separates her from the world beyond.

The more brutally cropped framing, the framing of incomplete space, in still # 3 force the observer so close to the images of the photograph that a breach of privacy results suggesting a condition outside of them. The crowded images of these stills are confined by this graphic form of framing which makes observing them intrusive. The tension caused, not only by claustrophobia but by the incompleteness of objects and body parts denied by the frame, is created by the mind's eye and its compulsion to complete things. The image is then seen and imagined compositionally in parts to be completed outside of itself.

The framing of the fast moving space of stairways, hallways (see still # 4) and roads is directional and implies the movement of the image in and out of the frame. The space of the hallway in still #4, for example, sweeps passed a woman leaning up against a closed door downward through the

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6 It is also important to consider the psychological weight of certain kinds of spaces. Bathrooms and bedrooms are essentially closed by the implicit private nature of their functions and have an interior versus an exterior aspect. Their use could also be associated with vanity; a place where a woman prepares herself for appearing as a women (an object) and thus for being looked at.

7 There is the suggestion of objectification which occurs through the cropping of a container of Morton's Salt and a sauce pan in the same way, with the same equality, as a woman's head. A momentary loss of hierarchy takes the form of the objectification of the female subject who gets treatment comparable to the appliances of her kitchen. (still #3)
frame at an angle from right to left. She is to one side of the motion of the hallway that leads outside of the frame of the photograph and into the space location of the viewer, or deep down the corridor into a space that would be outside of view.  

A collapsed depth of field or the framing of an absence of space is a powerful spatial device in this work. Film Still # 6 is an image of a woman in her pajamas on a bed. The photograph is perceptually unusually flat. There is a uniform darkness of shadows, and a low contrast of dark and light that make it difficult to separate the sprawling woman from the twisted bed sheets. The folds of her pajama top commingle and blend with the bed spread and sheet she is lying on. She becomes subsumed graphically with the patterns and textures of this dimensionless field forcing her to visually occupy the shallow space of the bed plane.  

The framing of borrowed space is collage space where the elements from one context have been removed and inserted into another. A form of simultaneity suggested by framing in photographs occurs literally in collage. The space of stills #13, & #17 feels flat and shadowless like the depthless photographs described above, yet without the strong visual connection to their field. In fact these photographs feel strangely displaced in their settings. The dizzying angle of the camera contributes to the feeling that these women are slightly off balance, and therefore not quite in place; they are

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8 The spaces in these photographs, although they suggest the world outside, seem to leave the woman behind without access to them. The woman in still #4 is up against and therefore identified with the wall which is static and unmovable. The diagonal line of the hallway also cuts off her feet as it travels by rendering her static and without agency.

9 The women in the photographs are given equal status with objects. The objects themselves are made more static and without a presence by the shallow space they are trapped in. This delegates more power and presence to the space outside of them.
not visually and thus not contextually secure in their space or visa versa. They are real bodies; they are real spaces; yet the bodies in the spaces do not seem real.\textsuperscript{10}

Still #17 not only illustrate this collage space but it begins to more directly address the dialogue of an outside to an inside world within the frame. They are similar to still #13 in that the framed architecture of the city behind the women's heads look as if it has been appropriated from another photograph to be used as a background. It depicts a scenic representation of the world outside of the world referenced by the woman's head.\textsuperscript{11}

Unknown space is the space framed by Sherman that envelopes these women; trapping and confining them by the strong suggestion of an unknown entity, unknown space that surrounds but that is outside of them. By not knowing the limits of the space they occupy, its boundaries can fuse with space that is beyond them. In film still # 32 a woman is enclosed by darkness. She merges into it; her black hair and dress begin to disappear; and yet she is defined by it and it by her. In still # 54, however, darkness is does not operate in exactly the same way. The figure of the woman is completely disclosed in a lit foreground that she moves through, but the darkness spreads out behind and beyond her. Lights in the distance sparkle like reflective eyes that watch her

\textsuperscript{10} In Still # 13 the woman undeniably casts a light shadow on the wall behind the bookcase, and is in the act of reaching for books. Yet there is still a sense of her not meaning it; as if she had been borrowed from another photograph in which she was reaching in the same way for canned peaches on a cabinet shelf instead. Not only is she pliable but her domain can be anywhere because she has the potential for real jurisdiction nowhere. Also she is a women who is, not reaching, but a reaching woman playing or appearing in the act of reaching. In this same way women are hopelessly relegated to the act of appearing to others which often precludes acting.

\textsuperscript{11} It implies every thing that is outside of their framed world. It is a studio reality; a simulation of the "real" world; the privileged male dominated world. The buildings loom up in a gesture that reminds us that the real world would overpower them.
from all directions. The photograph of the swimmer (film still # 46) is another example of this kind of space. The medium is not darkness but water which seems to engulf every part of her except her face mask. She is a fragment in the implied context of an entire body of water.

The framing of the space of an open landscape is very powerful in terms of its voyeuristic implications. Although less limited or confining spatially, the open field in which the woman in film still # 8 stands has an increased psychological sense of surveillance. At a distance the power of the watcher and the questionable nature of his intentions increases. Consequently the power of the woman in the image, who presumably does not know that she is being watched, diminishes. In still # 8 in an expansive landscape of ocean and shoreline a woman has been framed for surveillance. She is the main object of interest. When we automatically feel the effects of the camera's framing, selective, pseudo-objective eye; control at that distance only seems heightened. If she can be monitored in a landscape that is large and open in which she appears to move about freely, the monitor is a powerful force.

Still # 38, though unlike the rest of the stills in this series, is interesting to consider in terms of this issue of distance and its effect on a sense of control. The landscape is dense, dark, wooded and closed; a hiding place, a place of protection outside of the realm of surveillance. Yet this controlling presence outside of the framed image is as strong in this still as it is in the beach photographs. Admittedly, this is due in part to the fact that the image is out of focus which makes us hyper-conscious of the camera's scoping eye. The moment between finding the object of the photograph and focusing in on it, feels strangely like locating a target when hunting with a gun. The woman in the photograph then has a distinctive quality of being prey.
In some cases by framing space that contain actual mirrors, the phenomenon of mirroring, reflectivity and transparency are used as devices to bring the space outside of the framed image into the work. This directly supports an idea about how irrevocably bound the inside and outside of a frame are.\textsuperscript{12} In still # 2 a mirror on the bathroom wall reflects a vision of the space outside of the bathroom. Although this space is indeterminable it has an imaginable presence outside of the frame. In Still # 14 something slightly different happens. The mirror is larger and frames clearly a portion of the space outside of the frame which includes a table with a champagne glass on it and a man's jacket over a chair.\textsuperscript{13} The corner of the table that juts into the space of the image pulls the eye inside of the frame and then its mirror reflection sends it back out again. This seems to suggest more literally the dynamic tension of inside and out; one not being separate from the other.

Reflecting also takes place without the use of an actual mirror, but with the reappearance of objects, displaced reflections, through phenomenal mirroring. The corner of the table that intrudes on the lower left hand corner of the frame does not have the champagne glass on it that appears in the mirror reflection. It shows up, however, very mysteriously in a glass case behind the women's head on the wall. Although her face is not reflected in the mirror it reappears displaced in a photograph on the dressing table. This suggestion of

\textsuperscript{12} It is a symbiotic relationship not unlike the relationship between the surveyor and what he surveys; between subject and object. They "reflect" each other in that they define each other. So in one sense frames act as mirrors, because the object that is framed acts like a signifier that reflects its subject. It is also the location where the surveyed survey themselves again blurring this line between object and subject.

\textsuperscript{13} This reflection of the man's jacket located outside of the woman's framed domain is a direct reference to "the male gaze".
relationships, the disruption of the expected results of mirroring intercepts our perception to heighten the reflective properties of framing.\textsuperscript{14}

Still # 15 introduces a new aspect to these ideas in the use of a window. It is the notion that windows separate and connect. The woman in the photograph is framed in a window frame, staring with her back to the camera’s gaze. She is looking into the world outside which is a metaphorical reflection of the space of the gaze. The frame of the photo, as does the frame of the window, also separates and connects these two worlds.\textsuperscript{15}

In still #56 in the space in front of the glass appears the back of a woman’s head; on the glass is the reflection of her face. She attempts to occupy the space outside of the frame (the viewing space) by presenting the back of herself and facing into the image. Ironically the object of that gaze is her own reflection whose image is then clarified by a shadow cast by her head. She is illuminated by darkness. This describes the reflective nature of subject to object. The object not only reflects the subject but the subject clarifies the object.\textsuperscript{16} It creates the effect of her occupying both sides of the reflection causing the spaces effected by this mirroring to completely collapse into one another.

\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps it also suggests again the ultimate inaccessibility of the world outside the frame. Represented is a play replica of what is out there, a champagne glass for example, to be used in a parallel reality, on a stage in the space of the gaze where role playing is enforced. This glass is framed and encased for display to be looked at not unlike the woman in the photograph. The other glass in the mirror is the "real" glass perhaps even filled with "real" champagne in the space where the "real" action of drinking takes place.

\textsuperscript{15} When a woman looks through a reflective surface at the world outside of herself, she sees herself ghost like and immaterial, shimmering on it, making some unreal visual intersection with it. She sees herself not as herself but as the image of a woman looking out on the world.

\textsuperscript{16} This describes precisely the phenomenon of how the surveyed exist in a reciprocal condition of watching themselves.
CHAPTER 5
INHABITING THE FRAME: A POST OFFICE FOR HOUSTON

Focusing on this phenomenon of photographic framing, the project explores the design of a postal complex that shares its site with an existing postal carrier station located in a block of Houston between a rail yard and interstate 59 to the North, and a residential enclave to the south. The existing site adjacencies comprise a borderland that provides a condition suspended between the ritual territorialization of the single family residence and a matrix of transportation and infrastructure. It becomes a threshold that references these separate contexts in use and in form. The building use, a post office and carrier station, is a means of connecting the individual (the inhabitants of Houston) to these systems of transportation for the distribution of mail. The form of the project is a self-conscious examination of borders within the immediate city, within the site proper and within the formal program of use.

The specific project location is a plot roughly bounded by Westpark, Dincans, Bissonnet and Wakeforest streets in Houston, Texas. Its immediate adjacencies are typical of the city’s mixed-use zones that, in this case, function as a block wide buffer between two distinct, and atypically homogeneous areas. To the North of the site, the Westpark edge is mainly infrastructure; it includes radio and water towers, a major interstate, its feeder roads, train tracks and railway yards. Territorialized predominately by systems of transportation, it is almost without building density and human habitation, and yet has a strong, consolidated presence. The southern edge at Bissonnet forms a complex, transitional border to another strong, consolidated presence; West University Place. It is Township of Houston comprising a middle class, single-
family, residential neighborhood with few commercial buildings, a school, fire and police departments, a Townhall and water tower. Unlike Westpark, it is uniformly territorialized by people and buildings, through the codified rituals and self-imposed rules of a community of landowners. The two-story houses and the property surrounding them have, not necessarily a building density, but a consensus of human habitation in a dense matrix of boundaries (height restrictions, set backs, fences, hedges, lawns, driveways, garages, and porches) in a context of programmatic and visual homogeneity.

The immediate site adjacencies, however, compose a dynamic band of mixed uses, scales, spaces, marks and agendas; it is the space of light industry, warehouses, commerce, and rented apartments. The East edge at Dincans includes four courtyard-scheme apartment buildings with swimming pools and car parks. The West edge at Wakeforest includes a Coca-cola Bottling company office building, factory, and warehousing. The North edge of the site proper houses a small office for an elevator company, and an empty field, once an extension of the rail yard, on which the sale of a mound of peat is conducted. Finally the South edge includes the back sides of an auto-body repair shop, a liquor store, and a small printing press.

The site proper includes a warehouse, twelve bays of which have been appropriated for use as a Carrier Station by the U.S. Postal System. It is surrounded by parking shipping and loading activities on three of its four sides. There is an existing parking area for employees with shipping docks for postal equipment to the West, a raised fenced parking area for Postal Carrier trucks delivering mail at the North, and a loading dock with train tracks and rail yard running nearly the entire length of the building that at one time delivered Postal shipments for distribution by railway at the East.
The lot lines, easements, fences, loading docks and building frames of the existing site and retro-fitted carrier station have been manipulated to challenge the static application of frame as pure enclosure, as bounded limit, in this project.

As described in the diagrams provided, the site has been striped in two directions evolving and disrupting the concept of lot lines. In the project these lines scatter across the site re-defining and multiplying its edges forming bands of conditions and uses, once relegated to the outside or the inside of the site and existing building frames, that are pulled through the project. The horizontal and vertical boundary marks repeatedly form a crucifix that operates conceptually as a crossings.

The project operates as a continuous side condition in its repression of frontality through the development of a conceptual side yard on the West edge of the site and a conceptual rail yard on the East edge. At the West framing edge of the site through paths can be accessed for multiple crossings into the building, whereas the entry sequences at the East framing edge involve side-slipping or a parallel approach. It is at this edge that the formal building evolves located parallel to the existing loading dock and railroad tracks. A series of inhabitable boundaries mediate the public domain, through a linear organization of postal services and the internal workings of the postal system. They are the expression of a continuous threshold condition in which former distinctions between inside and outside, city and building, building and site, the postal worker and the civilian, the server and the served are articulated in a state of constant tension.

The work of Cindy Sherman, specifically her *Untitled Film Stills*, exploits these principles of photographic framing and this tension created by unresolvable boundaries. She uses the photographic medium in a nested
reference to the film still and to film. But she simultaneously conceives specific dualities in her images through framing (inside v.s. outside, object v.s. subject, the surveilled v.s. the surveillance) so strongly that we cannot perceive one of these without the other. The frame becomes not what separates the content of the photographic image from everything else, but what makes the two inseparable. Acting both as the contents of the photographs and as well as their photographer (as the object and the subject of the work, as the viewed and the viewer), she watches herself being watched challenging even the concept of these dualities by collapsing their separate domains into a single realm. Sherman occupies the frame; she exists in its threshold.

There are three significant moments in the project at which this space is directly explored through form that is dependent on use. One is at a series of post office boxes; the second is at the service and vending counters; and the third is at the building entrance over which the inspector's gallery crosses the major public axis. These moments occur at the p.o. boxes and service counters in the space created by an indeterminable putting together and pulling apart of wall-like partitions. The manipulation of supporting members and veneer panels suggests a suspended state of passing through blurring the distinctions made by static framing.

The post office boxes are located on the axis of these partitions in three occupiable boundaries alternately programed for use by a postal worker who provides the mail and the customer who retrieves it. These slots of space dovetail into an adjacent public entrance on one end, and a workroom space on the other. At these partitions a cross axis is also structured, not only with architectural form but with the body of the user, through the seen and the sensed space of the gaze. A duality of function is created and collapsed into a reciprocal condition of looking and being looked at through the precise and
constricted distances of body to wall relative to the size, height and location of cut openings.

The traditional boundary, a half wall confronting the public and the postal worker, at the service counter is manipulated, extended and retracted through shifting and alternating planes of posts, beams, counters and panels. A beam above a work area, for example, supports an armature of fixtures that light a customer area below; a counter slides through its work station and functions as a writing surface for the customer; panels alternately conceal and reveal the postal worker and the customer to one another tempering the singular nature of pure visibility.

The first entrance or threshold to the project is at the drive-thru on the far North stripe of the site; and perhaps the second threshold is at the post office boxes. But access to the service counters, located along the main public axis of the building, occurs at a more private cross axis corresponding to the internal workings of the post office underneath an inspection gallery. The two-story band of rooms used primarily by postal workers, not customers, separates the carrier station from the secondary workroom, and simultaneously accommodates administrative and support functions used by both. However, an inspection gallery which is physically accessed outside of the actual building enclosure and politically structured outside of the internal workings of the post office, threads its way through this axis. It is an open cat walk, intermittently visible and simultaneously panopticonal at its inspection points, that cuts through the entire project at the main point of entry to the public service hall. There is a reciprocity of surveillance that occurs along this axis, and that denies the autonomy of previous domains. Former structures of duality become an interminable imbetween.
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