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Mel Bochner: Painting
Outside the Frame
by
Jessica Payne Harner

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Nana Last, Assistant Professor
Architecture

Albert Pope, Professor
Architecture

David P. Brown, Assistant Professor
Architecture

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Jessica Harner
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ABSTRACT

Mel Bochner: Painting Outside the Frame

by

Jessica Payne Harner

Recent painting exhibits reveal an expanded definition of painting. Though it does not appear to fit within the category of painting, Mel Bochner’s 48” Standards is included in this expanded definition. Clement Greenberg’s modernist criticism attempted to limit painting to its formal elements, which led to the rejection of painting in minimalist and conceptual art movements. Mel Bochner integrates methodologies used by conceptual art to oppose modernist painting in order to open painting to theoretical discourse. In works such as 48” Standards, Theory of Painting, and Theory of Boundaries, he brackets out the material signifiers that allow us to recognize painting in order to investigate its structure. In this way, painting acts as ‘the missing signifier’ in these works and place them firmly within the category of painting.
Mel Bochner: Painting Outside the Frame

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*Special thanks to Nana Last, Albert Pope, David Brown, and Elizabeth McQuitty.*
1. *Is this painting?*
A figure sits with back to the viewer. Seen only from the waist up with cropped dark hair, it appears to be a young boy, shirtless, looking at something or someone out of the frame or hidden in the shadow. The indiscernible and slightly ominous space seems to relate directly to the subject’s state of mind. He is illuminated in sharp relief, his figure casting a dark shadow against the blank wall in front of him as if a bright flash had captured the moment.

*Planes of unmodulated color float in a white space, oriented towards some distant vanishing point. Green triangles hover in spheres to form something between trees and lollipops. The planes seem to extend past the width the canvas, and the viewer is surrounded by this candy colored virtual space; we have entered a form-Z model, recreated in paint at full scale.*
A canvas tacked to the wall is composed of scraps joined along the selvage edges. Across the seam, the colors change without interruption of the pattern. The oblong, blobby forms cover the canvas on a skewed grid. The paint application is quick and expressive exposing the ground color. The outlines of the blobs are simultaneously the unpainted background and the figure of the pattern. Swaths of color fill sections of negative space making zigs of yellow and green.
Unprimed canvas is stretched on a square frame. Vertical graphite lines divide the canvas. Within the lines, pigment is applied to create bands, but so subtle in color and surface that from afar, the canvas appears monochrome.

A modulated field of blue reminiscent of tie-dye, scorsharch ink blots and origami is centered on a white stretched canvas. The abstract blue form can only be described by its process—applying blue paint to folded canvas, leaving a pattern of wrinkles/negative spaces.
Rectangles of brown wrapping paper are tacked to the wall. Lines of black tape run along the edges of the rectangles, across them and onto the negative space of the wall, between the rectangles, and sometimes only on the wall. Short lengths of tape bracket the tape lines, and interrupting the tape lines are let坒et numbers that call out measurements of ‘48” and ‘36”.'
As we wander the galleries of recent exhibitions of contemporary painting, we are presented with all the above art works. Many of these we would expect to see, and we could easily trace their concerns through the historical traditions of painting. But this last work stands out, subverting our expectations given the categorical assertion. How can this last work, Mel Bochner’s 48” Standards, made from the mundane materials of paper and tape, be considered a painting? It is surprising to see it included as an important example of contemporary painting, particularly considering that it is not painted. Presented in As Painting: Division and Displacement at the Wexner Center for the Arts, it is well recognized as an important piece in the trajectory of conceptual art, an aesthetic practice that emerged from a rejection of painting.

In the last decade, a number of exhibits have been organized to address the condition of painting in the aftermath of modernism, such as Unbound: Possibilities in Painting at the Hayward Gallery, London (1994). Painting at the Edge of the World at the Walker Art Center (2001), and As Painting: Division and Displacement at the Wexner Center for the Arts (2001). Unbound is a collection of works that share little beyond a creative coincidence and an extension of the medium: “It is...an exhibition about possibility, of openings as much as closures, of leaps outside or beyond painting as much as the articulation of its limits and boundaries.”

Painting at the Edge of the World shares a similarly inclusive approach, with the questioning of boundary and edge central; ‘the edge’ being

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1Adrian Searle, Unbound (London: Hayward Gallery, 1994), 10.
defined as the location where the interaction between the artist and environment is crystallizes. The question of 'what is painting' is also raised. Curator Douglas Fogle writes, "Is painting a mode of thought? Is there a philosophy of painting that extends beyond the confines of the medium?" As Painting: Division and Displacement deals explicitly with what 'counts' as painting.

What these exhibitions share, and why 48" Standards is included, is an expanded definition of painting. The traditional definition of painting in the literal sense is a segment of art production that consists of the use of pigment on a two-dimensional, bounded surface—something painted. This definition is based on the materials used in production. Painting is traditionally considered to be a image created with paint, a representation of something, whether it be of objects in the world or feelings and ideas. The expanded definition presented in these exhibits reveals a shift from this medium specific, representational definition to one that is concerned with issues raised by the conventions of painting and allows concepts to be discussed outside of material considerations.

In 1973, Mel Bochner, a leading figure in the conceptual art movement due to works such as 48" Standards, made a radical shift in his art production by turning to painting as the most appropriate vehicle to investigate his concerns. This switch was a break from the tide of the art world in general as well as his own production, which up until this point had consisted of primarily conceptual works using non-traditional art materials, such as the brown paper and black tape of 48" Standards. Reflecting on his work from 1966 through 1973, Bochner

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declared, "Without the history of the practice of painting as the background for all my work, it becomes a series of disparate gestures...once you recognize that my work is an analytical attempt to rethink painting's functions and meanings, you realize that it is all one continuous investigation."3

Bochner's work of the sixties is described by the curators of As Painting as a rethinking of the minimalist practice in terms of conceptual thought, opening it up to systems of logic, linguistics, and mathematics.4 The explanation by Bochner of his work from this period and his return to painting in the 70's as "one continuous investigation" is an important insight into his inclusion in the As Painting show. His work is described as an investigation into painting, "in particular to those objects that offer themselves as a question of the conditions under which we are capable of recognizing paintings as paintings."5 It seems too obvious a thing to question, but this obviousness disguises our assumptions. Tradition has normalized painting to fit the definition of paint applied to a flat surface and we unquestioningly accept these terms. But without these material signifiers, are there other factors central to the medium that allow us to recognize it? In attempting this question, Bochner the function and meaning of painting, the conventions of painting, and the theoretical constructs of painting in order that it may be rethought as a 'tool' to think with.6

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4 Philip Armstrong, "Mel Bochner" in As Painting: Division and Displacement, 74.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
2. The weight of history.
To understand how such a work can be presented as pivotal in the trajectory of painting today, one must first look at the historical context in which Bochner was working. Artists in the 1960's were working in the wake of modernism: Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and the New York School of abstract expressionist painters of the fifties and the hard-edge abstraction and color field painters including Jules Olitski, Josef Albers, and Mark Rothko in the early sixties. These painters were backed by the critical legitimizing of Clement Greenberg's formalist modernism. Additionally, numerous new theories were being introduced during this period which would have a great influence on the succeeding generation of artists and critics: Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology was introduced in 1961 with the translation of “Eye and Mind,” and the central texts of structuralism by Saussure, Charles Peirce, and Levi-Strauss emerged.\footnote{Charles Saussure's “General Course in Linguistics” was translated into English in 1966, Charles Peirce wrote “The Icon, Index, and Symbol,” and Claude Levi-Strauss, a structural anthropologist, applied Saussure’s linguistic structuralism to the social sciences in “The Structural Study of Myth,” which first appeared in 1955.}

Jackson Pollock, Autumn Rhythm (Number 30), 1950.
Modernism in its most general sense refers to “the distinguishing characteristics of Western culture from the mid-nineteenth century until at least the mid-twentieth: a culture in which processes of industrialization and urbanization are conceived of as the principal mechanisms of transformation in human experience.”\(^8\) In art history, the term ‘modern’ generally refers to the art of this period and in relation to these wider issues of social relevance. Modernism coincided with the rise of critical theory and an increasing importance was given to the role of the art critic, the most dominant and influential being Clement Greenberg. “According to the later suggestions of Greenberg, what specifically establishes the modernism of a discipline or a medium is not that it reveals an engagement with the representative concerns of the age, but rather that its development is governed by self-critical procedures addressed to the medium itself.”\(^9\) Greenberg derived this self-critical procedure from Immanuel Kant, a highly influential nineteenth-century German philosopher, and applied it to the discipline of painting. He saw the defining of the medium as necessary for its advancement and historical continuation as a privileged realm.

Painting during this period was the most privileged medium of the arts. Greenberg’s treatise “Modernist Painting” of 1960 was a defining text and though written as a reflection on past painting, it had a proscriptive influence on artists. “The limitations of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the

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\(^9\) Ibid, 145.
properties of pigment—were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly."\textsuperscript{10} These limiting qualities of flatness, support, and the materiality of the paint (all formal elements of painting) became aligned with value judgments of quality and originality in Greenberg's modernism arising out of the formalist art historical tradition of connoisseurship. The essentialism which is implied in the limiting and intensification of the medium became elaborated into a quest for truth and transcendence via painting.

Painting's past attempts to create convincing three-dimensional illusion were no longer pursued, as depictions of the world were deemed literary and therefore not essential to the medium. The two-dimensional quality of the surface, long something to be overcome by painters, became something to emphasize, and artists worked to eliminate any remnant of the spatial from their canvasses. Space was considered the realm of sculpture and thus should be purged from the medium. Instead, painting's unique condition of flatness should be proclaimed with vigor. The flatness of decorative painting and other forms of painting that had never dealt with illusion were excluded due to their utilitarian roots. Greenberg's purification of the medium was driven by a need to justify the importance of the avant-garde. Defining the limits of various arts not only defined 'art,' but also defined 'not-art.' High art was placed in opposition to the products of an increasingly image-saturated popular culture, which Greenberg derisively

\textsuperscript{10} Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in \textit{Art in Theory 1900-1990}, Charles Harrison and
referred to as ‘kitsch.’

The latter half of the 1960's brought about challenges to the dominance of Greenberg's formalism. The purification of the medium was interpreted as reductive and this tendency is what minimalists latched onto in a move that was as much an extension of the principals of modernism as it was a rebellion against it. The minimalists, influenced by Frank Stella's shape paintings, took Greenberg's dictums of value to their logical conclusion. Thierry de Duve describes an exhibit of Stella's shaped canvasses at the Leo Castelli gallery in 1959 as enormously influential on the succeeding generation of artists: “...the show crystallized a new sensibility which had hitherto expressed itself only negatively, as a sheer lassitude with Abstract Expressionism.”

Frank Stella, Kingsbury Run, 1960.


Working in three dimensions, the minimalists produced objects that existed in a specific place at a specific time, as opposed to the transcendental art objects of the modernist esthetic. Minimalism shifted the emphasis from the expression of the artist (production) to the viewer’s experience of real objects in real space (reception). Perceptual issues became central, as did investigation into the conventions of viewership in much the same way as modernism had investigated the conventions of its production. The minimalist object undermined the traditional distinction between the art object and the viewer; it interacts with the viewer via perceptual shifts that occur as the viewer moves her body or gaze. This concern with perception and the role of the body emerged from interest in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology.


Merleau-Ponty’s treatise “Eye and Mind,” written in 1945 and translated in 1961, begins with a critique of the sciences: “Scientific thinking, a thinking which

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looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the 'there is' which underlies it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body—not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine...”13 Science's objectification of the world was distancing, ignoring the specific conditions of experience. Science and vision operated on a transcendental level that implied a universal knowledge of the world based on a Cartesian viewpoint. According to Merleau-Ponty, vision is based on experience. The human body has a specific and limited point of view that is incomplete and therefore can never know the whole world. Time is introduced to the process of vision as objects are revealed over time through an amalgam of looks. Depth is not projected as a third dimension, but is the primary condition of experience. The arts, particularly painting, as the arena of the experiential are fundamental to this position: “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.”14 Painting's privileged position in the first half of the twentieth century is used by Merleau-Ponty as an exemplar for a return to the experiential in science and philosophy. In the art world of the sixties, phenomenology's attack against the scientific method was used as a response to Greenberg: Greenberg had aligned Kantian self-criticism with science, and describes the application of self-criticism to art as bringing in the spirit of the scientific method.

14 Ibid., 162.
The influence of phenomenology not only undermined the boundary set up between painting and the other arts by modernism, but also undermined the separation of art from everyday life and experience. Art was no longer removed from the realm of the ordinary and burdened with the weight of providing an opening into the sublime. A work of art as interpreted by the minimalists "needs only to be interesting"; the criterion of "interest" had replaced the formalist criterion of "quality."

Reacting against the priority of the visual in art, another category of art emerged concurrently in the sixties labeled 'conceptual art': "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art." Defined as such at its inception by Sol LeWitt, the conceptual movement expanded to include many approaches to the privileging of intellectual process over formal expression. In 1966, Bochner exhibited four loose-leaf binders placed on pedestals and filled with photocopies of notes and sketches that he collected from various artists, scientists, architects, and thinkers. Titled Working Drawings And Other Visible Things On Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed As Art, the piece placed Bochner as a leading figure in the conceptual art movement.

The binders were filled with such diverse materials as sketches, calculations, floor plans, invoices, and diagrams. All were copied (the Xerox

\[^{15}\text{Judd, 813.}\]
machine was at this time a new technology) and enlarged to the same size and inserted into binders for display. Though some of the original documents collected were proposals for projects by artists such as Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Dan Flavin, the presentation of such papers instead of traditional forms of art production questioned the status of the art object. The substitution of photocopies for originals inserts another degree of removal. Presenting work by numerous individuals as the work of a single artist further undermines traditional notions of originality and authorship.


Though minimalism and conceptualism were emerging simultaneously and share an oppositional mode towards modernist painting, the forms this

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opposition take differ. Minimalism broke from the synchronic, instantaneous reception of the modernist esthetic in favor of the phenomenological (which introduces a temporal aspect), but formally it was a continuation and retained status of the art object and the primacy of the visual. Conceptual art on the other hand, took up a critique of the autonomous object and the implicit notions of aura, originality, and singularity. The role of the viewer in Working Drawings... exceeds the perceptual role in minimal art. Bochner forces the viewer into active participation: physically in the turning of pages and intellectually in the reading of the text and images. Visual experience is replaced in Working Drawings... with linguistic experience. Art becomes about ideas, not sensibilities, as was the case in modernist and minimalist art.

Of fundamental importance to the conceptual art movement was the emergence of linguistic structuralism. Structuralism emphasized a shift of focus from the individual object to the system to which it belonged, as linguistics looked at not a single word but the entire language in order to study meaning. The structuralist methodology closed and limited a system for study. Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of linguistics was a central source and in his “Course in General Linguistics” he establishes semiology as the study of signs. The sign is “the associative total”\(^\text{17}\) of the significate (the word or image) and the signified (concept). The relationship between these terms is arbitrary, in that there is no natural connection between signifier and signified. Also important in Saussure’s model is the idea of linguistic value: “language is a system of interdependent

terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of others.\(^{18}\) Signs do not have exact equivalents, and meaning relies on similarity to and difference from other signs; "signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position."\(^{19}\)

The artists of Bochner's generation were greatly influenced by these ideas, exploring art in terms of systems, series, and language. The structuralist approach saw an artwork as a function of a system of conventions. The work of an individual artist merely inhabited the preexistent signifying system that enabled the production of a piece of artwork, which de-emphasized the role of the artist as an original creator—a strong argument against the ideas inherent in Abstract Expressionism. Bochner took a systemic approach to painting, looking at it in terms of a preexistent signifying system. Though emerging from these ideas, Bochner's investigation is more post-structuralist in that he attempts to open the system rather than limit, in a way deconstructing it. He rethinks painting by presenting repressed assumptions for reevaluation. Modernist conventions essentialized a perception of painting that emphasized material and process.

Modernism's project was linear: the reduction of the medium to its essential elements implies the existence of an endpoint, a penultimate painting. It is primarily this issue which led to a questioning of the relevance of painting, as artists began to ponder the possibilities of what could be expressed in such a restricted vocabulary. Painting's dominance as the privileged medium of the avant-garde, particularly as portrayed by Greenberg, became a burden to artists

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 162.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 165.
of the post-Abstract Expressionist generation. Painting had been so rigorously defined by Greenberg's formalist reading that artists looked to find an escape from a medium that appeared to be approaching its limits. Greenberg's modernism had strictly enforced the boundaries between media, between high and low, viewer and object, and art and life. As these boundaries broke down, so did the singular viewpoint. A plurality of forms, media, and critiques emerged, but the unifying factor for art in the late sixties and seventies was an opposition toward painting and the general attitude that painting as a medium was no longer relevant. Conceptualism, minimalism, land art, performance art, and appropriation art all pitted themselves against painting.²⁰

²⁰ De Duve, 205.
3. *The missing signifier.*
48" Standards, included in the As Painting exhibit, is representative of a number of works by Bochner that investigate the conventions of measurement and its limits as a system of meaning. 48" Standards is a series of 28 configurations of one to three sheets of brown paper rectangles. The paper rectangles are hung on the wall and arranged with various measuring schemes marked by black tape lines. The lines indicate distances noted in inches with letraset numbers. In 48" Standards (#1), a single piece of 36 inch by 48 inch brown paper is hung on the wall, with ‘48”’ marked in the center. Black tape lines extend from either side of the number notation to the edges of the paper. Small tape lengths run perpendicular to these lines, bracketing the ends. The bracket marks share their outer edges with the paper, so the entire measurement notation is contained within the 48 inch length of the paper. The letraset numbers and bracket leader marks indicate the actual width of the paper, and redundantly the same 48 inch notation appears above, entirely outside of the paper and aligned with the top edge. Along the left edge, also outside the paper and lining up similarly on the outside edge, is a number and line notation of 36 inches.

Marking the actual size of the piece of brown paper with its measurements and leader notations overlays the literal experience of 36 and 48 inches with the notational system used to indicate dimensions in lieu of actual scale. Typically, such size notations are marked on a small scale drawing in order for the reader to interpret and mentally visualize the actual scale. These notations act as
signifiers for the actual size, which is the signified. The absent object is the referent. While it seems at first redundant to mark a measurement in literal space, it juxtaposes the experience of real space with the mental space activated by the notational system. Overlaying the two in large scale on the wall magnifies discrepancies between them and calls into question the conciseness implied by measurement. The thickness of the tape brackets and the way the numeration breaks the continuity of the line so that the measurement is not in fact 48 inches long muddle the clarity of measurement and reveal how systems of measurement operate as imperfect systems of signification. Bochner's demonstration undermines the implied transparency and objectivity of measurement.

Mel Bochner, 48” Standards (#1), 1969.
48” Standards was conceived in series, showing a variety of ways in which a grouping of the same size forms can be related to each other and to the surrounding space using measurements. The numerous permutations of 48” Standards can be tied to the structuralist systemic view of art. Bochner sets up a system of investigation and presents as many iterations as possible emerging from that system. A multiplicity of versions avoids a singular assertion, whereas a single version implies that arrangement as somehow privileged or truthful.

In most of the groupings, such as #25A, #5A, and #26A, measurements are marked not only of the sheets of paper, but of spaces between them. Including measurements for the areas between the brown sheets of paper focuses attention on negative space. The gallery wall is both the negative space in 48” Standards and the support for the work. While much of the conceptual art that points out the gallery space functions on the level of an institutional critique,
Bochner’s attention to spatial context shifts the relationship of the viewer to the artwork:

space was no longer a construction beyond the wall that fixed the viewer at a distance, but one in which the viewer was central, in which the viewer’s (or gallery’s) space was projected from within. Whoever would experience these spaces must think not so much of measuring the walls but of mapping his/her experience of the space onto the walls. The gallery walls become a boundary for phenomenological experience rather than a screen for illusionistic projection.\(^{21}\)

Murals and stretched paintings both function as a surface for projection of an illusion of reality, acting in the oft-used metaphor as a window. As opposed to such traditional pictorial practices, in 48" Standards the objects on the wall do not function to take the viewer beyond or outside of the gallery space. Bochner expands the viewer’s experience from the bounded plane of the canvas to the entire space that contains the viewer and artwork.

Historically, artists had attempted this by inserting depth into the two-dimensional plane, but the boundaries of the canvas remained. The thin surface of brown paper affixed to the wall denies any experience of depth, illusionistically or

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literally. Greenberg had shifted the modern viewer's experience of painting from a focus on the depth of illusionistic space to the surface of the canvas, which resulted in making the edges of the canvas even more important. This was made explicit by the shaped paintings of Frank Stella, where the edge determined what was on it. Bochner pushes open the boundaries in the inverse direction, opening the space in front of the two-dimensional surface, so that it acts more like a mirror than a window. There is no explicit boundary between the artwork and the space—Bochner has eliminated the edge of the canvas as a limit. The boundaries of the two-dimensional surface are indiscernible from the space of the viewer.


The integration of the wall in 48" Standards situates the work in the vertical picture plane, the traditional space of painting. Additionally, the brown paper rectangles mimic the shape and size of a typical painted canvas, even
recalling a monochrome painting. Such clues allow the work to function as a
critique of the conventions of painting (such as its unquestioned verticality), and
not simply an investigation of measurement systems. About 48" Standards,
Bochner states, “The sheet of brown paper had to be hung ‘as if’ it were a
painting. I meant it to function as a proposition: what would it mean if this were a
painting?”22 In this work, and particularly in Theory of Boundaries and Theory of
Painting which deal more explicitly with painting, painting acts as ‘the missing
signifier.’ The specific term ‘painting’ is bracketed out (but not absent) in order
that Bochner may reexamine that which painting signifies—the structure of the
system of painting that is masked by a preoccupation with subject matter in
illusionist painting and the material and technical fixations of formalist
modernism.

According to Frederik Leen, Theory of Boundaries is the first piece where
Bochner explicitly deals with painting. Brown pigment is thinly applied with
painterly strokes to the wall, referencing to the original form of painting, the
mural. The use of the wall as the ground for painting, unlike traditional mural
painting, does not attempt to hide the limits of the architecture. The effect is
rather to draw attention to them, functioning as did the negative space in 48"
Standards. Thin pencil lines mark out four large squares that are arranged
equidistant within the edges of the wall and aligned with the floor. The width of
the wall and the need to place four squares within this length determines the size
of the squares, and therefore the height of the piece from the floor. In this way

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22 Mel Bochner, “How Can You Defend Making Paintings Now? A conversation between Mel
Bochner and James Meyer” in As Painting: Division and Displacement, 199.
the architecture determines the form of the piece. The limits of the wall bound
the composition, one of many boundaries alluded to by Bochner.


Though the title implies a rigor that recalls Greenberg's scientific
aspirations for art, *Theory of Boundaries* does not function in the sense of
implying certainty. The work is rather a statement of the underlying principles
behind the relationship of surface to border using both visual and conceptual
language. In modernist painting, the reduction of relational elements increased
the importance of the edge of the canvas to the overall composition. The frame
became generative in some cases, as the shape of the canvas in Stella's black
paintings determined what was on it. In monochrome and color field paintings,
such as Mark Rothko's installation in the Rothko Chapel, the shape and
placement of the canvas on the wall becomes figural on the ground of the gallery
wall. Prior to modernist concerns with surface and border, painters were faced
with the edge of the canvas as the limits of illusion. Bochner's concern with
boundaries is derived from the structuralist concern with limits, and the edge of
the canvas has traditionally been the limit of the painting. Bochner eliminates the
canvas, and using the wall as ground and a pencil line as a stand-in for the canvas edge, he forces a questioning of these limits—what is the boundary of this artwork? Is it the pencil line? Where the pigment ends? The wall? The entire gallery space?

Theory of Boundaries functions linguistically to study painting, posing questions about art using art practice. Theory of Boundaries consists of four squares inscribed directly on the wall labeled with word ‘fractions.’ Theory of Painting also uses word fractions lettered on the wall, which correlate to four painted rectangles presented on the floor. As in 48" Standards Bochner uses overlay, but here language is substituted for measurement. A written element is layered over the visual image, revealing the interdependence of the two systems to convey meaning. Without the words (prepositions lacking an object, in the case of Boundaries, and subjectless verbs in Painting), the visual form does not convey meaning. The linguistic element of the work is reliant on the formal demonstration and vice versa. Meaning vacillates between the two, revealing the limits of each.

Within the squares of Theory of Boundaries are word fractions: at/in, over/in, ___/in, at/out. In accordance with these word fractions, the pigment application differs. From left to right, the first square (at/in) is fully painted in, with crisp edges. The pigment is ‘in’ the square and ‘at’ the boundary of the square. The second square (over/in) is fully painted as well, but the brown paint roughly extends beyond the invisible square—it is ‘over’ the boundary. The fourth square has no pigment within it, but brown pigment extends from the sharp edge of the
square: color is 'at' the edge, 'out' of the square. The third square is curious: the boundary is marked only by a barely visible pencil line. An informally applied patch of pigment is in the center of the square where the word fraction is located. The numerator in this word fraction is left blank. The denominator reads 'in'; the pigment is within the boundary of the square. The relationship between the word fractions and image of pigment and square work in a relatively forthcoming way in the other three squares, establishing a way of reading the work. While the denominator in the word fractions refers to the placement of the surface (pigment) in regards to the boundary, the numerator is the relationship between the two. So what does it mean that Bochner has left a blank in this case?

Mel Bochner, sketch for *Theory of Boundaries*, 1969-70.

Painting, according to Leen, is the area of indeterminability in *Theory of Boundaries*. Leaving the numerator empty here leaves the question open. The

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signifier painting cannot be defined by a simple word fraction, it is too slippery. Post-structuralist linguistic theory reposes the relationship between signifier and signified, explaining that signifiers merely refer to other signifiers (other linguistic phrases). Thus meaning is the result of difference from other words and slips between chains of linguistic equivalence, unable to be pinned down in specific terms. Bochner treats the category of painting in a similar way, using the blank to indicate its inability to be pinned down.

Recent art history had implied a stable boundary: between the artwork and the viewer, the edge of the canvas and the wall, between categories of art. Bochner contests these boundaries and reveals them as arbitrary. According to Bochner, Standards was “a critique of the limitations which the reading of painting at that time allowed.” The idea of bracketing something out, or setting it aside, became a methodology for Bochner to investigate something that when left in place was bounded by the conventions of its experience. By bracketing out painting he entered into an investigation of its conventions, which he continues more explicitly in Theory of Boundaries with the use of the ‘blank.’

Theory of Painting is another work done the same year and deals with the issue of figure/ground relationships as well as boundary/edge conditions. Rather than using the wall as ground as in Theory of Boundaries, Bochner uses the ground literally. Theory of Painting consists of newspaper arranged on the floor and spray painted with blue rectangles. Consisting of four iterations as in Theory of Boundaries, they are paired with word fractions: Cohere/Cohere,
Cohere/Disperse, Disperse/Cohere, and Disperse/Disperse. Two iterations have newspaper arranged in an orderly, grid-like manner: Cohere/Cohere has the blue rectangle intact on the newspaper grid; Disperse/Cohere has fragments of blue spray paint throughout the grid. The second two iterations consist of scattered newspapers, one with an intact blue rectangle spray painted on top (Cohere/Disperse) and the other with fragments of the blue rectangle on the scattered sheets (Disperse/Disperse). Hand lettered on the wall is the title of the piece and the numbered titles of the four iterations. Interpreting the word fractions based on the paint and newspaper arrangements, the top term refers to the blue spray painted areas (figure) and the second term describes the newspaper (ground).


Bochner presents all the combinations of the binary terms in the four iterations, displaying a structuralist exhaustion of terms that contrasts with the open system of terms set up in *Theory of Boundaries*. The piece is so conceptually coherent
that it has a puzzle-like satisfaction to the reconstruction of the word fractions
and their visual exhibit on the floor. Part of this is the comprehension of its
construction—newspapers laid out, blue rectangles spray painted, and then left
or rearranged in various permutations. The fragments of blue coerce the viewer
to reconstruct the original process of spray painting a blue rectangle on the
gridded sheets of newspaper then rearranging them to break up the unity of the
blue rectangle. In addition to cataloging figure-ground, Bochner presents a study
of edge conditions in Theory of Painting with the second term. The presentation
of figural (cohere in the first term) and non-figural (disperse in the first term) on
an ordered rectangular background (cohere in the second term) and on a
disordered field (disperse in the second term) demonstrate the impact of the
edge condition against a looser arrangement that begins to move into the
traditional category of sculpture.

Painting, though now named, is again bracketed out in the sense that
conventional material and presentation has been forsaken in order that
convention can be investigated from outside of painting (though not outside of art
practice). Though Bochner uses paint in the piece, he uses spray paint, atypical
in art applications. The physical distance required for its application carries into
reception as the mechanized application betrays no trace of the artist's hand.
Though Bochner's materials may seem unconsidered and secondary, they are in
fact a critical element of presentation. Philip Armstrong describes Bochner's
materiality as "a condition of its visibility and the structuring of the space it
opens." Just as spray paint subverts the materiality of conventional painting, the newspaper as a 'ground' also undermines traditional material choice. Greenberg's strict division between art and life, and high and low art is violated by the use of the detritus of the everyday as the support of painting.


Again, the size of the piece is largely determined by the architecture. The newspaper arrangements are very large; each measures approximately ten feet by sixteen feet. The limits of the gallery space allow the piece to be no larger and still allow space for the viewer to circulate. The large scale and horizontal orientation brings into play the warping effects of perception. Rosalind Krauss, in her analysis of the work, points out that Bochner recognized "that painting

\[24\] Armstrong, 74.
parallels sculpture in being *defined* by a single axis or direction."\(^{25}\) The first work that names painting exists in the space of sculpture. The vertical plane, the space of painting, is one of projection and is tied into the structuring system of perspective. The shifting of the plane to the horizontal has a warping effect that undermines perspective's ordering of space.

![Image](image东路)  

*Carl Andre, Steel-Aluminum Plain, 1969.*

The interest in material expression asserted in *Theory of Painting* is tied to Bochner's belief in "the materiality of the signifier." This refers to the idea that "all vehicles of meaning, whether words or images or medical symptoms, have an irreducible physical component or support, and that this component itself affects whatever meaning might be possible in that signifying medium."\(^{26}\) This returns to the idea of painting as the missing signifier. Bracketing out the materials that signify painting, Bochner frees it from the physical component that had so long defined it and determined the possible content. 'Painting' with new materials, Bochner is able to open up new possible meanings: "We might even say that he

\(^{25}\) Rosalind Krauss, "Theory of Painting" in *Thought Made Visible: "...sculpture had been reduced to just this single defining property: space understood as a pure directional axis, its horizontal extension bodied forth by the continuity of the floor," 217.

\(^{26}\) Krauss, 218.
opens painting to a 'theory of painting,' thus demonstrating that the signifier
/painting/ is never a stable category but a structural hinge around which
Bochner's other work is opened to its simultaneous coherence and dispersion."²⁷

Theory of Painting and Theory of Boundaries were completed in 1970.
Soon after, in 1973, Bochner returned to the practice of painting in the traditional
material sense. He began a series of murals using casein, a glue-like paint that
dries to a rich, velvety surface. By the 80s, he was producing oil paintings on
stretched canvases. For much of the decade, Bochner pursued additive
compositions based on the combination of triangle, square, and pentagon in
large wall murals using casein over pencil lines. The murals evolve in
complexity, from reading clearly as permutations of the three forms sharing
edges to new forms emerging from the overlap of the forms. The overall form of
Syncline, from 1979, is an arching shape composed of the triangular, square,
and pentagonal forms that share edges. The triangle and square are grid based
forms, and where these shapes share lines the composition maintains an
orthogonal structure. The introduction of the pentagon torques the forms off the
grid, inserting an unpredictability to the additive process of butting the shapes
together. The use of varying levels of contrast between the colors of the shapes
complexifies the image—low contrast colors next to one another merge to form
new shapes. The colors are very saturated, and the application is sensuous,
allowing the white of the wall to gives the colors a sense of light. Bochner's
continuing interest in the spatial extension of the boundaries of painting into the

²⁷ Armstrong, 74.
space of gallery is evident in use of negative spaces and the reveal of the wall through the pigment.

Three Planar Arcs, installed at the Whitney Biennial in 1977, consists of three of these combination forms painted on one wall at eye level. The splitting of the composition across the wall makes it impossible to take in the entire piece in one look, and close observation activates the memory, as most of the work is always on the visual periphery. The color application calls attention to the perceptual, extending vision past the painted surface and activating the white space around the shapes. In the mural pieces, such as Three Planar Arcs, Bochner attempts to create the experience of this space by offering the viewer an understanding of the quirks and limits of visual experience. Bochner eventually stopped painting the wall murals, and began to focus more on the drawings that had previously been studies for the murals. He moved to drawings on canvas,
and eventually to oil paint on stretched canvas.


The most interesting aspect of Bochner's paintings on canvas is their unusual shape. Bochner originally painted on rectangular, pre-stretched canvasses, but he began to paint on unstretched canvas, letting the form that emerged through the painting process determine the shape of the stretcher:

Most shaped paintings begin with the shape. The choice of a shape for the stretcher more or less determines the image inside the painting. The object comes first and painting it comes second. I realized that my procedure was different. Although I begin with some ideas for the initial internal shapes, the external shape remains a variable until the end. First I paint the painting, then I decide on the shape. This allows me to capitalize on whatever develops while I'm painting. I can intensify the tension between the interior and the exterior shapes because both remain plastic. This subverts a simple figure-ground reading by constantly shifting the emphasis from inside to outside until it
becomes difficult to identify which is which...  

Bochner's subversion of figure-ground relationships is an interest continued from his early career seen in the Theory of Painting. And clearly, he is continuing to explore the limiting conditions of painting, now in terms of individual object. The boundary is not the generator of form as in Stella's shaped paintings, but vice versa.

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28 Bochner, in interview with Charles Stuckey, p.20.
4. *In the space of painting.*
Rolls of canvas in varying sizes lined up, side by side on the floor. Dyed in vibrant colors, the striations painted parallel to the selvage edge recall the rolling and unrolling of the canvas lengths on the cardboard tubes.
Three blank sheets of plywood hangs on the wall, supported by nails in each of their four corners. Only the natural pattern of the wood grain differentiates the three. The titles consisting of combinations of red, yellow, and blue (in German) provide color, but only conceptually.
Electric lights, fabric, string, assembled to create a still life of a space. The three-dimensional assemblage is what one might find if one could enter into the world of a Hans Hoffman painting, a play of color, light, texture, and form as well as boundary.
A tall rectangular column sits in the corner of the gallery. Topped with a thin yellow volume, a vivid red faces one plane, with a slender vertical strip of pink along the edge that wraps around to cover the next plane. Opposite the red side, a striking pistachio green appears—the chromatic opposite of the pink. Again, a sliver of pink wraps around the edge and covers the fourth side of the column, excepting a vertical band of red that wraps the edge to return us to the original plane of color.

Three fabric rectangles in green, orange, and blue, arranged on the floor in a line. The vibrant colors energize the piece, and activate the surrounding floor space as a field for these figures. Tactics of minimalism are evidenced in the repetition of the rectangular shape and the grid-based geometry. But the color, not paint on fabric, but colored fabric, questions limits and destructures painting. The painter’s palette is brought into the space of sculpture.
Returning to our tour of recent painting exhibitions, we also find the above works. Each is an elaboration on the idea of painting's expansion. As diverse as they appear, what these artworks share with one another and with Bochner's work is a view of painting as a way of thinking art, concerned with questions of structure rather than essential properties. "For many of the artists included in As Painting, any suggestion of moving away from the exhausted limits of painting into another space is a denial of painting's capacity to reconsider its own structure." Bochner's work may appear to exist in "another space" based on its materiality and linguistic emphasis (as it is most often considered in the space of minimalism and conceptualism), yet its insistence on reconsidering the conventions of painting place it firmly within the space of painting. Works such as 48" Standards, Theory of Boundaries, and Theory of Painting do not exist at the edges or boundaries of the medium nor are they peripheral to the practice. They directly identify and address the concerns central to it, those things that allow us to 'recognize paintings as paintings.' "Conventions give the boundary of experience," stated Bochner in a recent interview. Investigating the conventions of the medium, he in turn opens up our experience of it. As often as the state of art today is described in terms of its dissolution into a generic condition after modernism, mindless of history and difference between media, close analysis of the work of artists such as Bochner speaks otherwise.

Working in the context of a continuing tradition, Bochner allows us to recognize the structure of painting in these works despite absent material signifiers. While clearly breaking from the visual forms and presentation of
modernist painting, he shares a definition of what those central concerns are: 
edge/boundary, figure/ground, color, space, orientation. There is an inherent 
formalism in all of Bochner's work. Not in the Greenbergian sense where form 
becomes content, but in the sense of an insistence on form, or what Rosalind 
Krauss referred to as the materiality of the signifier. Bochner insists on a 
material expression of concept. Where modernist painters reduced painting to its 
formal elements, Bochner on the other hand inserts logic, linguistics, and 
philosophy into the investigation of form. These areas of thought were integral to 
the conceptual art project so it is remarkable that Bochner was able to assimilate 
the concerns of this oppositional aesthetic practice to theorize the most 
traditional of aesthetic practices. Such a re-conceptualization not only opens up 
painting but reveals the ability and success of the conceptual art project to 
extend beyond form. Indeed, the conceptual art project need not limit itself to a 
rejection of form, but can reveal new possibilities for formal disciplines in the 
application of its methodologies.


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