

Surfaces



BOXED IN: DES FACES, DES VISAGES ET DES SURFACES

The Exhibition "Passages de l'image" at the Ohio State University's Wexner Center for the Arts / L'exposition « Passages de l'image » présentée au Wexner Center for the Arts de l'Université d'Ohio State

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BOXED IN: DES FACES,

DES VISAGES ET DES SURFACES

A CONFERENCE REVIEW

Stephen Melville

Review of the Exhibition "Passages de l'image" at the Ohio State University's Wexner Center for the Arts.

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Compte-rendu de l'exposition "Passages de l'image" présentée au Wexner Center for the Arts de l'Université d'Ohio State.

The Ohio State University's Wexner Center for the Arts is clearly a building that takes some living with before any settled judgment becomes possible, and I have not lived with it long. But what strikes me viewing its current show, **Passages de l'image**, is the inseparability of my experience of the works from their particular installation in the Wexner.

To begin then with this building. For all the complexities and rigour of its structure (at bottom two overlapping systems of grids both of which are realized at a variety of scales), it is singularly successful in refusing any settled shape, profile, or face; while holding itself firmly within one's sense and image of the campus, it nonetheless withholds itself from any simple effort at orientational mastery, slipping and sliding between other buildings whose mass and volume remain graspable in familiar, quasi-sculptural ways. I take this to be a measure of Eisenman's success in designing a building that

is only (as a) between -- a slash or spacing rather than a monument, marking axes rather than founding them. This means, I think, that one of its ambitions must be to a pure exteriority, an architectural surface either devoid of interior or endowed with it in a way that does not let it be thought or apprehended apart from its passage toward and attachment to its exterior.

That such should be a shape of contemporary architectural

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ambition undoubtedly merits much fuller commentary that I am willing or able to risk yet, but it is at least clear that it constitutes a potentially significant intervention within gallery space as it has emerged and clarified itself in its relation to modernist art. It does so in two interlinked respects: the building makes an (at least theoretical) issue of the interiority that has been the long-established site for the display and protection of works of art (and of easel paintings in particular); and it refuses (at least in principle) the neutral cube that has become the privileged shape of this interiority.[\[1\]](#)

I have hedged these statements because the Wexner Center remains a gallery and so necessarily submitted to at least some of the imperatives that have historically structured such space. Here it is less clear to me how successful the building is. Some technical problems are already evident -- for example, the expanses of glass that help visually confound interior and exterior can create problems for works sensitive to light (I would include here not only the material sensitivity of certain kinds of fabric and so on, but the visual sensitivity of some of the pieces in the **Passages** show, pieces that need little or no light to gain their effect and for which special enclosed spaces must then be made after all). It is also the case that with a single large show, like **Passages de l'image**, the refusal of "the white cube" leaves the space, with its long ramp and side galleries, open to considerable narrative investment. The blind stair in the last gallery can perhaps be read as intended to undercut this possibility, but even that will depend on an already achieved narrative effect.

Of course these last considerations have already started sliding toward a discussion of a particular show at the Center, and I

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suspect a certain difficulty in grasping the building apart from the various contents that move through it must also be counted among its ambitions. Apart from its inhabitation by **Passages de l'image** -- a show that involved

fairly extensive construction within the galleries and occupies all of the available space -- I know the Wexner only abstractly. By the same token, I am obliged to say I don't know the works of **Passages** apart from their integration into this installation (although some are easier to imagine apart from it than others). That the gallery forces, or can force, this kind of complexity is not in itself likely to be finally either a good thing or a bad thing; and if this pressure is in some sense always present in a gallery, its explicitness at the Wexner offers a relatively new and potentially interesting situation for criticism.

About **Passages** I want to begin by saying very little -- except that it does seem to me to be fairly strongly taken up into the narrative potential of the Wexner spaces -- to the point that the blind stair and its spy window amount to little more than a foreshadowing as one looks ahead to the ultimate space and work. And it is from this last moment that I really want to begin. Within the narrative space carved out by this show it is the last, furthest, and literally deepest moment, and if, as such, it is freighted with a certain expectation of truth or closure, the work installed in it gives every appearance of delivering that cargo. The work is by Dennis Adams, probably best known for his series of bus shelters -- public, site-specific, interventionist works often executed in collaboration with a figure like Barbara Kruger. **Vortex** (1990) is more overtly theatrical and less purely architectural than those installations while working very much within their means and spirit. It is, in effect, an open cube on two of whose opposing faces images are projected. Benches invite the beholder to sit and watch. But in moving to occupy these seats, viewers must first pass by a large, illuminated still image mounted on the inner orthogonal axes of the cube-- an image which will then be occluded from their sight by the screens they sit to watch. The still image is of a hunger striker in Tienanmen /pp 6-7/

Square; the moving images are two collections of clips from "historically significant films and videotapes." [\[2\]](#) The room itself is otherwise in darkness -- and since this room is the Wexner's performance space it is dark indeed: that space, a full level lower than the other galleries and placed by the logic of this show at the heart of the Center, is, in all essentials, a black box.

So this is where the story ends: at the heart of the Wexner's refusal of interiority there lies a black cube, and in that cube there is another cube before and around which we are to be made aware of the corruption of our own interiority by a work of large political pretense, utterly devoid of real political interest, seriousness, or urgency.

Passages de l'image is, I think, an odd show. The hefty catalogue with its numerous texts give the appearance of a deeply thought-out (not to say heavily theorized) exhibition -- an impression reinforced by the at once tempting and obscure title of the whole.^[3] But few of the writers seem to have much /pp 7-8/

of an idea what to do with the title, and at a certain level one cannot shake the possibly somewhat cynical impression that the show is really organized by three loosely interlocked considerations: the juxtaposition of generally less-known French work with better-known, primarily American, work; a certain generalized urge toward "intervention"; and a desire to display something of what is technologically possible (thus the inclusion of what amounts to a small display of computer software and, somewhat more forgivably, Michael Snow's holograms).^[4] But across these weaknesses, certain things nonetheless emerge, and what emerges most particularly for me --what has driven these remarks from the outset-- is the persistence within the work included of, on the one hand, faces (Dennis Adams, Robert Adams, Geneviève Cadieux, Jean-Louis Garnell, Bill Henson, Suzanne Lafont, John Massey, Bill Viola, Jeff Wall) and, on the other, cubes (Dennis Adams, Dan Graham, Gary Hill, Thierry Kunzel, Chris Marker, John Massey, Bill Viola, Jeff Wall).^[5] These two things are joined in the simple fact that cubes /pp 8-9/

have faces --a fact that became art historically salient with Minimalism-- so it is tempting to argue that if this show as a whole is about anything, it is perhaps the complex legacy of that movement.^[6] It is perhaps simply my obsession and certainly a measure of my sense of the continuing pertinence of the terms deployed by Michael Fried in his "Art and Objecthood"^[7] that I take this to mean that these cubes are progeny of Tony Smith's **Die**, and these faces further explorations of those offered and withheld by that work.^[8] That is, the pieces in **Passages** share to a high degree in the Minimalist crisscrossing of aesthetic theatricality and skepticism about other minds.

The Wexner habit of referring, quite naturally, to its performance space as "the black box" strikes me then as profoundly fitting to it, at least as it is used or discovered by **Vortex**. A black box in the modern world at large is something whose interior is beyond our access; we can describe what goes in and what comes out and even certain regularities in the relation between the two; but the workings of the box itself --typically these are electronic, although sometimes neurological-- remain permanently beyond our ken.pp 9-10/

We can imagine human beings as black boxes. There are strong tendencies within modern knowledge in this direction, as there are also in our more or less ordinary lives -- and as there are in much of the work in **Passages**. The obvious way into this is through the "anti-humanist" tendency of the various

faces on display in the show.[\[9\]](#) Bill Viola's **Passage**, with its utter eradication of the face as a legible presence precisely through an absolutely close and infinitely slow concentration upon it is perhaps the most dramatic example,[\[10\]](#) but Jeff Wall's **Eviction Struggle** offers a more lucid working through of the themes that interest me here.

I mean lucid in two senses: the first is straightforward -- the elements of the piece are laid out in a way that allows clear and easy exposition; the second has to do with the interest the piece itself takes in lucidity, and it points on the one hand toward Wall's long-established use of light boxes, and on the other to his insistence within his images on an absolute clarity.[\[11\]](#) Where Viola and others in this show use various technologies to give us images that in one way or another blur and resist our fixing of them, Wall offers images that are devoid of uncertainty and that are, in the usual sense of the term, wholly legible. There is nothing we cannot see in his large color image of an eviction on a sunny afternoon, no place of mystery, concealment, darkness, lack of focus.

And yet there is an obverse. We walk around behind this /pp 10-11/ image and on the other side of the wall in which it is mounted we find a set of video monitors, each one so placed into the wall as to correspond to a particular aspect of the overall image on the other side -- here the policeman's head, here the struggling man, the running woman, and there the spectator: Each character in its own monitor, each separated from every other by a greater or lesser expanse of wall, each performing its own looped and finite action in its own time, with the various loops joining or disjoining at random, the whole struggle never taking place in unison except by coincidence -- and even that coincidence, were it to happen, would be ungraspable by the viewer. This is, I think, illegibility of a different order -- unless, as I also suspect, it is the secret of the lesser illegibility of the other pieces. It is not that we cannot read what is before us but such reading delivers us only to disjunct and mechanical repetition; the apparent legibility of the initial image, as well as that of each of the images in the individual monitors, is finally but a lure. As with Adams's piece, a certain political ambition or desire is clear even as it is emptied out by the very terms of its material imagination -- an imagination that is finally of nothing but the wall that divides the two sides of the work.

Adams's work and Wall's can be said to meet, both theoretically and historically, in the work of Dan Graham. In **Cinema Model** (1981), the model for a movie theater that he contributes to **Passages**, we have an explicit cube, the architectural offspring of Smith's **Die** and the various mirrored boxes of Minimalism: when the lights are on in the theater, its screen acts as a mirror and its glass walls are transparent to the outside viewer. As the lights go down, the walls become transparent for the audience, and as the film rolls, it too is visible, in reverse, to the viewer in the street. Depending upon the exact lighting conditions, it is possible that the screen will function at once as mirror and support for the projected

image. Like all of Graham's work, this can pass as a complex meditation on interior and exterior, public and private, self and other, and like anything now with a mirror in it, it can appear to bear the weight of Lacanian exegesis (of the sort that Graham himself offers in relation to his video work in his **Vidéo-**

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Architecture-Télévision, or that Buci-Glucksmann offers in her catalogue entry, or that Thierry de Duve offers in his extended commentary on Graham's work in **Essais Datés**[\[12\]](#)). I suppose what I find most interesting about it is, first, its marked difference as architecture from the Wexner Center, and, second, the clarity of its demonstration of "the logic of the black box" I have been trying to sketch in these few pages: it doesn't matter whether we are inside or outside that box but only that passage between is forbidden or cancelled by the very terms of that passage. This is, I think, near the core of what Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell have meant by "theatricality" -- a way of asserting the relatedness of, say, an audience to what it witnesses by putting the prior fact of actual relation out of play -- refusing to acknowledge a circumstance that must then be readdressed as if it were an epistemological riddle.

But perhaps the point will become clear enough by considering another work in **Passages de l'image**. Gary Hill's **Disturbance (among the jars)** seems to me to operate according to a very different and much more compelling logic, and I take on small sign of this to be his effort neither to conceal his technological base nor to accept the boxed-in video-monitor as a quasi-sculptural given. Instead, he simply lines up seven bare television tubes to be watched by the audience they face. On and between them, the work unfolds, and whatever it accomplishes, it accomplishes only there, in that unfolding. Whatever "depth" we may wish to attribute to it (of images in its juxtapositions and overlayings, of meaning in its workings of the Gospel of St. Thomas against the **récits** of Maurice Blanchot) is the work of this surface and does not lie beyond our grasp. I say this despite the obvious fact that **Disturbance** is "hermetic" in a way none of the other pieces I've discussed are: there are pretexts to be uncovered, languages to be disentangled, /pp 12-13/

images to be "decoded." It is in this way rather like the Wexner Center itself -- and as with the Wexner your reaction to the thing may be enriched or baffled by the game of decoding, but the decoding is not, all by itself, going to settle anything.

What matters to me in **Disturbance** is the odd relation it establishes with the space in which it is installed. The images that appear variously within and across the array of tubes (the immense snake that eventually occupies

all seven monitors; Jacques Derrida strolling across the gaps between them; texts scrolling across one another and from screen to screen) are woven into that space and the equally interwoven sounds that fill it. They create passages in it without moving outside or behind it; they mark out a sort of internal "beyond," a beyond as if woven into vision itself as a kind of rhythm or scansion. Where Wall and Viola and Graham work to block or cancel legibility, Hill reinvents it -- which is to say, he asks his viewers to take reading as an activity that does not stand or fall on the basis of anything other than the text: no backstage, no interiority, no meaning prior to or apart from the means of (what one might wrongly call) its expression. Here "difference" (whether between us and the work we are content simply to view and to hear, or among the elements of the work, or between the work and the space in which it is installed or even finally and simply among us as we view) refuses concretization as wall or mirror or window -- figures that typically promise relation only to mark its failure. Instead difference just is the fact of relation "itself" -- and so also the fact of transformation and alteration: **passage**. The small internal gallery given over exclusively to Hill's piece (as the performance space is given over to Adams's) is fully a white cube, and it is perhaps important that it knows itself for a theater -- a row of seats, a barrier across which -- which is also to say, grace of which -- we engage these images-in-passage. It is tempting to call this, as if for the first time, tele-vision.[\[13\]](#) /pp 13-14/

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There is, in this show, in this place, a complex struggle over space and the figuration of space. My reading of that struggle is no doubt partial, but I hope that in that partiality I have remained faithful to the demands inscribed in the show's title and reinforced by its current installation. Viola's is, I believe, the only work to take **Passage** as its title; the most obvious referents here are, on the one hand, the liminal event on display in the film (a birthday party) and, on the other, the extremely narrow enclosed entry to the small, dark, wall-to-wall screening room. Presumably these two referents are unified within the dominant mood of the piece -- a mood I find hard to characterize but which certainly includes elements of restriction or compulsion as well as elements of deep and intimate incomprehensibility, enforcing a kind of technological alienation deep enough to no longer be able to assert with any surety what it is that has thus been alienated and so also an alienation that refuses itself all pathos.

There is nothing particularly unfamiliar about this: the mood of much contemporary theory and of much contemporary art (a mood we may be inclined to describe as "postmodern") is frequently said to be "antihumanist," and it is easy enough to find the marks of this antihumanism, as Jacques Aumont does, in the faces so prominent in

Passages de l'image. It is also clear enough that our feel for this mood is intimately tied to our sense of the place of technology in the contemporary world --so that, for example, photography can be expected to show us the face that painting can no longer persuasively show-- this "postmodern" face is the face of a black box, its most compelling popular figuration the mirrorshades /pp 14-15/

of cyberpunk. **Passages** is, at the level at which faces and cubes repeatedly call to each other across the variety of works, haunted by this figure.

I suppose that in all this my interest has lain with trying to map out the rough dimensions of a different sense of **passages**, a sense I find at work both in Hill's **Disturbance** and in Eisenman's **Center**. This sense turns less clearly on restriction and blankness; its logic is more fully that of a certain punctuation, an opening of space against itself and toward sheer alteration. The passages it creates are, if you will, not tunnels but arcades -- which is not to say that they "mediate" interior and exterior but that because of their construction such things as "interior" and "exterior" become possible. And with that possibility there comes also and of course the further possibility that we will then think they stand in need of "mediation" or that there is something to be penetrated, some place to be gotten to. And finally and also of course there comes the evident hard fact that we can no longer get there. Ça, ce n'est pas sage.

I suppose also that it is obvious that I should like these distinctions to point toward a distinction within "postmodern antihumanism" -- a distinction that would play our sense, mournful or celebratory, of a certain loss of the human off against a countervailing sense of a discovery of our selves as having never been anything other than a passage beyond or between "the human," a humanity thus no more lost than gained (if also no less). It is the passage between these two antihumanisms that I take to be of the moment; in its visibility --the visibility of the complex terms through which we might claim to face one another-- lies whatever real political force **Passages de l'image** can claim. It would not so much being going too far as it would be going in the wrong direction to want to imagine this as a way out.

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[1] The now-classic site for the discussion of these matters is, of course, Brian O'Doherty's **Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space** (Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1976), the title of which alone is ample testimony to the interlinking of these two motifs.

[2] I quote from the Wexner's guide to the installation. Included in these clips are work by Gary Hill, Thierry Kunzel, Marcel Odenbach, and Bill Viola, as well as by others whose work participates in the film program accompanying **Passages**. No doubt some will find this reflexivity to deepen the work's critique in its situational specificity and others will find it to empty the gesture of any potential power by confining it merely to the artworld; such controversies strike me as essentially empty.

[3] **Passages de l'image**. Barcelona: Centre Cultural de la Fundació Caixa de Pensions, 1990. Among those contributing catalogue entries are Raymond Bellour, Christine von Assche, Jean-Louis Schefer, Chantal Pontbriard, Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Jacques Derrida, Paul Virilio, Thierry de Duve, and Louis Marin.

[4] The role of the fact and idea of "technology" here is at once obvious and nonetheless obscure. The equipment necessary for painting does, after all, constitute a technology--but clearly the terms of **Passages** mean to exclude painting. It is tempting to think that the implicit qualification is in terms of electronic technology--but then the camera is not in general an electronic device and **Passages** clearly does mean to include it. We are thus left with our usual bundle of malformed intuitions about "automatic reproduction," and the show does little to transform or further articulate them.

[5] The "cube" category as exemplified by my list may seem somewhat capacious; I can only hope that the general work of my argument will be persuasive enough to sustain what would otherwise have to be argued out case by case. The considerable overlap between my two lists is worth remarking; the only piece shown in the galleries and not included on either list is Marcel Odenbach's **Die Einen der Anderen** (1987).

[6] A fuller account of this history would no doubt want to add this emergence of an abstract problematic of facing a further account of the re-emergence of the represented face in Pop Art and especially Warhol. The relevance of these further elements to the issues of "automatic reproduction" in **Passages** I take to be obvious.

[7] See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in G. Battcock, ed., **Minimalist Art** (New York: Dutton: 1968).

[8] The case for obsession is perhaps furthered by my pieces "Throw" (**Blank Page** 4, 1990) and "Beat Box" (forthcoming in B. Readings and B. Schaber, eds., **Postmodernism Across the Ages** (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press)).

[9] See Jacques Aumont's catalogue essay "Image, Face, Passage."

[10] That the conditions of approach to this work to a degree literalize the comparisons Fried uses to discuss the position of the beholder of Smith's work is certainly worth noting. I touch on these conditions briefly below.

[11] For a differently weighted approach to Wall's lucidity, see Louis Marin's catalogue essay "An Image, from Apollo to Dionysus."

[12] See, in addition to the *Passages* catalogue, Dan Graham, **Vidéo-Architecture-Télévision** (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1979) and Thierry de Duve, **Essais Datés** (Paris: Jacqueline Charbonne, 1989).

[13] This would gain real purchase, if it could be shown that calling it television means that in it the broadcast medium and the body of artworld practices oriented to videotape came into some crucial interpretive contact. I am not yet prepared to pursue this thought further.