

Frame of Reference/Frame of Referents

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EVOLUTION OF THE FRAME:

The spatial qualities of framing should not be surprising. Originally, architecture and art were a single entity and architecture was the frame. Painting and sculpture were an integral part of the building's fabric and to remove or alter either the building or artwork would destroy both. An interesting example of this mutually dependent relationship is the ill-fated history of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and the rectory wall on which it was painted. As an artwork painted directly on the rectory wall, architecture is the frame, providing structure, support, protection and a controlled space of viewing. Unfortunately, this close relationship is also at the heart of the painting's precarious state. In 1652 a doorway was cut into the wall, destroying a large section of the center of the lower portion of the painting. In addition, during the Second World War, the rectory that houses *The Last Supper* was bombed and almost completely destroyed. Prior to the bombing, an iron framework and sandbags were installed to protect the painting. These protective measures prevented the wall from collapsing, saving the painting which would otherwise have been lost. Throughout its history, the structural stability and the integrity of the wall has defined the stability and integrity of painting.

In addition to the wall's structure, the fate of *The Last Supper* is also inextricably linked to the wall's surface. Leonardo chose not to use traditional fresco techniques in favor of an experimental method of his own invention. Unfortunately, his method was flawed and *The Last Supper* has been subject to rapid deterioration since its completion. Moisture from the wall continually causes the paint to flake, while at the same time, Leonardo's method also prevents restorers from removing the painting from the wall altogether in order to preserve it.² In a way, this painting lies at the transition

between art integral to the wall and the subsequent phase of art as an applied surface. Trapped in this transitional phase, the painting and the wall are incompatible, yet inseparable.

Subsequent art began to separate itself from the physical body of the building, taking the frame with it. No longer an integral part of the building's construction, art and the frame served as an architectural liner, a surface applied to architecture. In the case of painting, the growing popularity of canvas in the 16th century allowed paintings to be adhered to the wall (marouflage) rather than painted directly on it. Paired with the earlier introduction of wood paneled walls in the Gothic period and later developments such as French boiserie, paneling provided an organizational system capable of carrying art. In this form, the wall surface and art were still "built in" although not necessarily permanent. This is the beginning of the role of the frame as an independent mediator between architecture and art.

As art delaminated itself from architecture, the frame-as-object was introduced. Art and the frame became fully independent of architecture. In its early form, the painted surface, the panel, and the frame were a single unit, carved from one piece of wood. The panel and frame were fabricated and then sent to the artist to be painted. Under these conditions, the frame was an integral part of the painting process and was always present within the composition of the artwork. Many early works acknowledge the presence of the frame as an integral part of the spatial relationship between the real and imaginary worlds. As seen in the painting of *Christ and the Virgin* by Robert Campin (c. 1430-1435, Netherlands. John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1917), Christ's fingers gently rest on the frames edge, occupying this space between.³ (Figures 1 and 2.)

Figure 1.



Ultimately, the frame and the artwork became separate objects. The widespread use of canvas and the development of easel art, the typical picture hung on a wall, transformed art into a transferable commodity, easily moved, traded or exchanged. The need to move art necessitated a more convenient format for transport. Without a rigid frame, canvas could be easily rolled and safely carried. The detachable frame was introduced.

At this point as an independent and variable entity, the frame briefly became a work of art in its own right. Renaissance records show that frames were often considered of equal and sometimes greater importance than the work of art itself. Frames were often commissioned prior to commissioning the painting and at times cost more than the artwork.⁴ Ultimately, however, variability reduced the frame to a subordinate status relative to the artwork, primarily assuming a decorative or functional role. As a variable element, the frame

has a transient relationship with art and is relegated to the world of fads and fashion, changed at will.⁵ This transient nature leads to a position of perceived inconsequence and non-presence. In an analysis of the framing theory of the artist Nicolas Poussin, Jean-Claude Lebensztejn equates the role of the frame with that of scaffolding. For Poussin, he states, "the frame should be there, but not insistently there; it should not attract too much attention to itself." Like scaffolding, "once it has helped to build the depicted space, it should disappear as much as possible..."⁶

Arguing against the perceived inconsequence and non-presence of frames, Barbara Savedoff, a prolific writer on the subject of frames from the perspective of philosophy, asserts that frames are often essential, providing what she has termed "the presentational context" of viewing art. For Savedoff, this context is more than just of interest from a sociological and historical perspective. This con-

Figure 2.



text may have been influential on the artist while making a work of art and thus necessary to understanding the work properly.⁷ Whether visually prominent or recessive, the frame plays a major role in influencing and manipulating the observer's reading of a work of art. A frame can affect our perception of its artistic merit, its value, or the importance and social prominence of its subject. It can also serve as instructional support, providing text references to the artwork's subject, artist, date and origin. It can be changed to reflect changes in taste and changes in ownership. As such, it is ultimately a means of appropriation.⁸ In each of these conditions, the frame is positioned between the observer and the artwork or between the architecture/context and the artwork.

THE PROJECT

Returning to the idea that the frame is an essential mediating element in the relationship between the observer and art and between architecture and art, our project entitled *Frame of Reference/Frame of Referents* is situated at their intersection to explore the potential of the frame as a space of encounter. The project began as an act of guerilla framing by imposing frames (object and installation) on a series of industrial photographs. (Figure 3.) It is an uninvited collaboration between our firm, Intellectual Property, and Carol Front, an Allentown based photographer. We developed the idea of guerilla framing to heighten the awareness of how a frame is an autonomous object applied to

Figure 3.



a work of art to manipulate experience and meaning independent of the original intent of the artist. As stated by Barbara Savedoff, “what is important is not necessarily a particular frame, but the existence of a frame.”⁹

THE REFERENT

The starting point of this inquiry was to use the frame to manipulate the way one perceives a utilitarian object as a work of art. The difficulty presented by Carol Front’s industrial photographs is the inability of many observers to see beyond the industrial objects’— a dilemma described by the French philosopher Roland Barthes as the photograph’s inability to be distinguished from its referent. Barthes states:

“A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent. . . .By nature, the Photograph . . . has something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe. It is as if the Photograph 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 in certain tortures. . . .”¹⁰

The idea of the referent became the means by which the frame as both object and installation would operate to engage the viewer to provide a space of encounter. Through the referent, the

frames transcend the functional needs of structure, support and protection to provide a space for instruction, comprehension and appreciation.

PART 1: THE FRAME AS OBJECT

The first part of the project, the frame as object, is a steel frame designed as a commentary on the artist’s photographs. Highlighting the duality present in the images of operating electrical power plants, the frame oscillates between the opposing readings of the photograph’s referent through the labels of art and utility. Comprised of blackened structural steel and gold leaf lettering, the materials manifest this duality in their connotations of ordinary and precious. (Figure 4.)

The presence of text on the frame is derived from centuries old traditions in frame-making. According to Jacob Simon in his book *The Art of the Picture Frame*, it was fairly common in the 16th and 17th centuries to embellish frames with “elaborate inscriptions running round the frieze either identifying the sitter or propounding a moral text, usually in gold capital letters on a black ground.”¹¹ The labels art and utility operate as both an identification of the subject and as a moral text. (Figure 5.)

As an identification of the subject, the labels suggest multiple readings. By questioning the notion of the referent, the works can be viewed as images of art or images of a utilitarian space. In addition, utility also identifies the type of space depicted – an electrical power plant. As a moral text, the labels question what art is and where one finds beauty. The art/utility labels make manifest the internal debate of the observer viewing the photographs, challenging conventions of both. In addition, continuing with framing traditions, the artist’s name was also inscribed on the frame. Her last name, Front, also takes on a dual reading. It is both an identification of the artist as well as a directional reference. The labels are inscribed on opposite sides of the frame, allowing them to be interchangeable based on their relationship to the observer. (Figure 6.)

The steel frame draws upon these traditions of framing as the starting point for its commentary, providing “instruction” through labels. In each case, however, these labels have a double entendre, making them less didactically factual and more

Figure 4.



manipulative. The double entendre itself provides a space for multiple readings within the frame's conceptual space of instruction. Ironically, in an attempt to be art specific, the inscriptions on the frame ultimately become self-referential and generic. The labels can be applied to the frame itself— is it an art object or a utilitarian object? - and Front simply becomes a reference to hanging the frame which is finished on both sides.

PART 2: THE FRAME AS INSTALLATION

Historically, during the early period of the development of the frame-as-object, many frames were

designed by architects and early frames often replicated architectural space. Frame design made liberal reference to architectural language, appropriating building forms such as classical pilasters, architraves and pediments as well as gothic vaults and arches. Similarly, early frames maintained a strong relationship to the spatial and structural configuration of windows, including sills (with drip caps¹²), curtains and shutters in their design. This can be seen as a remnant of art and architecture's original conjoined relationship. This replication of architectural space acknowledges the role of architecture as the original spatial frame in

Figure 5.



which we encounter art. (Figure 7.) As frame construction moved beyond architectural language and developed its own forms, the implied perspective inherent in the mitered corners continues to create a sense of space. This persistence of an implied space suggests the persistence of a need for a space of encounter in which to experience and appreciate art. The question is what role architecture can assume in shaping a modern space of encounter.

In the case of architecture, one might argue that even after art became an independent entity, architecture, whether a Renaissance palazzo, a nineteenth century picture gallery, or a modernist white

box, has always been there as a frame for viewing art. Although this is true, the difference is that in these examples architecture's role is indirect – a frame superimposed on objects already independently framed. The object frame surrounding the artwork acts as the mediator between the art and architecture.

The presence of a mediating frame is essential because the danger of architecture reasserting itself as the primary frame is that it may compromise the integrity and conceptual strength of the art. In traditional Japanese architecture, *fusuma* panels, the sliding partitions used to divide interior spaces, often double as surfaces for wall paint-

Figure 6.



ings. When these panels are displayed independent of their architectural context, they are appreciated as priceless works of art. However, within the context of their original settings as sliding walls, they are often subordinate to the architecture and perceived as merely surface decoration. Their functional role supercedes their role as art. Similarly, when the architect Peter Blake proposed an "ideal museum" to display the works of Jackson Pollock in which Pollock's paintings became the walls of the museum, Pollock responded, "The trouble is you think I am a decorator." Writing on the subject, William Kaizen states, "As painting becomes wall, it is sublated into the autonomous, modernist space of Miesian architecture. Pollock's work is

turned into a decorative surface, into an interior design for a modernist space."¹³ At its worst, artwork could be reduced to wallpaper or contemporary super-graphics.

The goal of the second part of this project was to continue to explore the notion of the referent as a means of "instructing" the observer about the work of art while linking the frame back to a spatial experience. The first iteration of the frame-as-installation began by expanding the role of the frame to become a series of screen walls dividing the space of a gallery. Maintaining the frame's role as structure, support and protection, the edge of the photographic print reads against the screen wall



Figure 7.

surface, allowing the screens to frame the image and isolate it from its surroundings.¹⁴ The screen walls also transform the frame to play an active role in determining the circulation of the space—actively engaging the observer as he or she moves through the gallery to experience the art. (Figures 8 and 9.)

As a means of instructing, the frame manipulates the reading of the photograph's referent through its materials and construction. The screen walls are fabricated using common metal studs and the studs are left in an unfinished state, fully exposed. The top and bottom of each screen is finished with painted wood trim to match the surrounding architectural context and to signify through this convention that the screen walls are finished. The screen walls manifest the notion of the referent through the undeniable presence of the unfinished studs. Here a stud is just a stud—yet it transcends the condition of unfinished wall framing and is readily accepted as an architectural installation within the space. This reading of the installation is intended as a parallel to the observer's reading of the artwork. (Figure 10.)

In the most recent evolution of the "Frame of Referents", installed in the gallery of the Slought Foundation, Philadelphia, we explored the frame as an enclosure—a pavilion within the existing architectural space. In this format, the frame and art maintain their independence from the architecture of the gallery, yet the frame is freed to take on a more overt role as a space defining element. (Figure 11.) However, once again, the frame serves as the mediator between the artwork and the architecture.

The idea of the frame as an extended space forming an enclosure was inspired by a frame designed by Stanford White for a painting by Thomas Wilmer Dewing in 1888. (Figure 12.) This frame, designed by an architect, has a sense of implied space that is particularly strong. In a perspective drawing analysis of the frame based upon the typical position of an observer, a potential space was discovered of nearly two feet in depth.¹⁵ (Figure 13.) This version of the "Frame of Referents" is an attempt to build out a space similar to the space implied in Stanford White's frame.

As an enclosure, the frame provides varying levels of interaction between art, architecture and the

observer. The position of the observer at a distance and centered on the image preserves the traditional perception of the frame as a border. The linear construction of the studs collapses into a series of ribbed surfaces like the moulded surface of Stanford White's frame. From this position, the frame isolates the photograph from its surrounding context. (Figure 14.)

Once inside, the frame provides the observer with a more intimate experience of viewing the artwork. However, as with any intimate experience, intimacy reveals reality—warts and all. The frame expands to reveal its structure as well as the relationship between the artwork, itself and the surrounding context. Here the observer is presented with the artwork in dialogue with the gallery space, mediated by the regulating lines of the frame. Thus, the ceiling grid, plumbing, lighting, and general infrastructure of the gallery are revealed to the observer in all their functional grittiness, paired with the aestheticized image of a power plant as art. (Figure 15.) In addition, as one meanders around the frame, the linear structure of the studs conceals and reveals these views between the real and the ideal. This transparency allows the observer to inhabit the real space of the gallery and the imaginary space of the art simultaneously, in effect occupying the space between of the frame.

By questioning the frame's role and asserting it as an autonomous object, this project places the observer at the intersection between art and architecture. This is the space of encounter, the space of the frame. Ultimately, this becomes a space of transgression, in which the frame crosses the boundaries that define architecture and art to position itself in both worlds. From this vantage point, it becomes an opportunity to explore the architecture of the frame's space to influence and enrich the observer's experience of viewing art.

NOTES

¹ Webster's third New International Dictionary of the English Language—unabridged, Merriam Webster Inc., Publishers, Springfield, MA 1993 — Philip Babcock Gove, Ph.D. editor-in-chief

² Ludwig H. Heydenreich, Leonardo: The Last Supper (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1974) Leonardo's method and history, pp 16-23. Information on history of restoration pp. 91-97.



Figure 8.

Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.

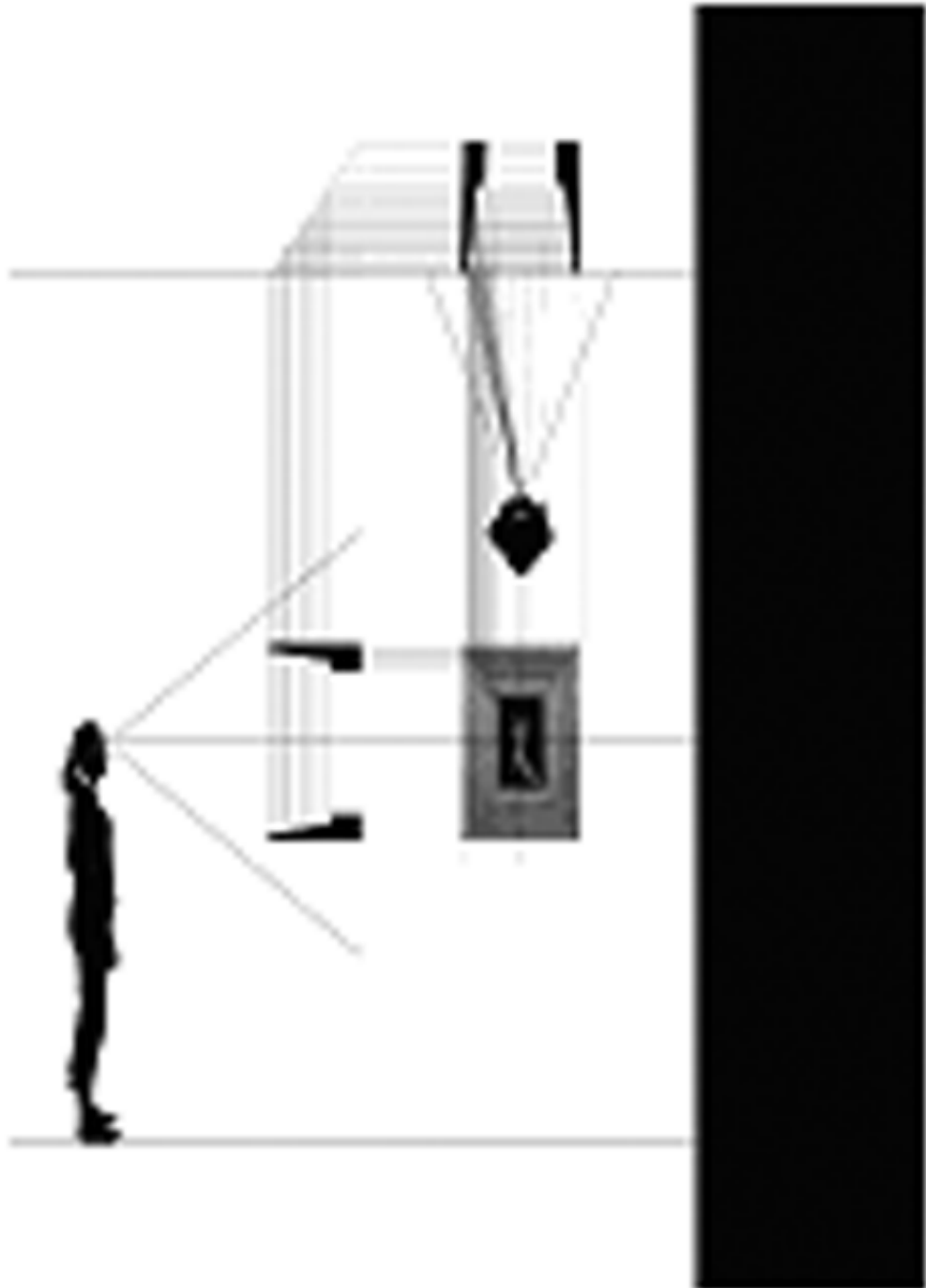


Figure 14.





Figure 15.

³ Trompe l'oeil effects blurring the separation between art and the frame were a popular and effective means of establishing a connection between the imaginary world and the real world. For an historical overview of trompe l'oeil and the gothic period paintings of the Netherlands and Belgium, see Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts, 'A History of European Picture Frames (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers Ltd, 1996) p.76.

⁴ Barbara E. Savedoff, "Frames," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, No.3 (Summer 1999), pp.345-356. To draw her conclusions on this subject, Barbara Savedoff in turn references Henry Heydenryk's *The Art and History of Frames* (New York: Heineman, 1963, pp.34-36) and Clauss Grimm's *The book of Picture Frames*, trans. N.M.Gordon and W.L.Strauss (New York: Abaris, 1981, pp.19 and 30)

⁵ For an effective visual documentation and analysis of the impact of frames on one's perception of a painting and its aesthetic qualities see Pieter J.J. van Thiel and C.J. de Bruyn Kops, 'Framing in the Golden Age: Picture and Frame in 17th-Century Holland, Andrew P. McCormick, trans. (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1995). The color plates on pp.18-24 are particularly effective, documenting the visual transformation of reframed paintings in the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

⁶ Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "Framing Classical Space," *Art Journal* 47 (Spring 1988): 38.

⁷ Savedoff, "Frames," pp345-346.

⁸Pieter J.J. van Thiel and C.J. de Bruyn Kops, *Framing in the Golden Age: Picture and Frame in 17th-Century Holland*, Andrew P. McCormick, trans. (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1995) p. 27.

⁹ Savedoff, "Frames," p353.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, The Noonday Press, 1990), pp.5-6.

¹¹ Jacob Simon, *The Art of the Picture Frame: Artists, Patrons and the Framing of portraits in Britain* (London: National Portrait gallery Publications, 1996), p. 50.

¹² Claus Grimm, *The Book of Picture Frames*, Nancy M. Gordon and Walter L. Strauss, trans. (New York: Abaris Books, 1981). Grimm refers to the presence of drip caps on the under edge of Gothic frames, mimicking sill con-

struction of a window (p.8). For a detailed description of the architectonic qualities of religious and secular frames see pp.26-33.

¹³ William Kaizen, "Framed Space: Allan Kaprow and the Spread of Painting," *Grey Room* 13 (Fall 2003). William Kaizen discusses the relationship between art and architecture as it relates to the paintings of Jackson Pollock. Material referenced here is from pp. 85-88. The quotation from Pollock is as quoted by Kaizen from Peter Blake, *No Place Like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept* (New York: Knopf, 1993), pp113-114. The quotation from Kaizen is from p. 88. In *No Place Like Utopia* Peter Blake recounts his conversation with Pollock and states: "I was taken aback – perhaps because he seemed so precisely on target. But the more I thought and think about it, and I still do, some forty years after the fact, the more I think Jackson was wrong: of course I thought his paintings might make terrific walls (after all, architects spend a lot of time thinking about walls). But what his paintings really meant to me, from the first day, was something I can only describe as the "Dream of Space"— a dream of endless, infinite space in motion." (pp.113-114). The question is at what point does the frame/spatial context cause this endless, infinite space to cross the line from a space of art to become a space of architecture.

¹⁴ It is important to note that a distinction is made in this project regarding the four-inch white border surrounding the photographs. This white border is part of the photograph and the way it was printed by the photographer. It is not a mat or applied frame. Although one might argue it is a frame nonetheless, it can also be read as part of the photographer's composition for the image – a secondary frame imposed by her. Since the introduction of the Italian-*cassetta* frame (one of the most popular frame types – the typical box frame with equally sized mouldings on all four sides) in the sixteenth century, we are conditioned to expect frames to be symmetrical on all sides. If Carol Front had intentionally positioned the image asymmetrically on the white field, we would be more likely to read it as a compositional device.

¹⁵ This drawing analysis assumes the observer is positioned three feet from the painting. As one moves further away from the image, the depth of the frame would increase.