

Morgan Fisher

The Door and Window Paintings
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Hall 1.0 Stand C2
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Galerie Daniel Buchholz presents at this year's Art Basel / Art Unlimited a painting installation by artist and film maker Morgan Fisher. This installation is a reconstruction and adaptation by the artist of a site specific installation developed for the exhibition "To See Seeing" at the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein in 2002.

The Door and Window Paintings

The Door and Window Paintings were made in 2002 for a show at the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein (NAK). I was against paintings that are rectangular. The rectangle is conventional, so conventional as to be invisible, but it not a necessity, and whatever the shape of a painting is, it shouldn't be invisible. (I am still against the rectangle, with qualifications.) And I was against pictures, as I still am. A rectangular painting, even if it looks abstract is almost always already a picture, and a picture is a composition. A composition requires the artist to make decisions about what happens within the confines of the painting. Composition is arbitrary, and so inevitably points to the subjectivity of the artist. Just as the rectangle is invisible, so are a painting's proportions and size.

But in fact these aren't conventions, they're choices, and so are acts of composition, just as what the artist does within the confines of the painting is an act of composition. Composition in its customary guise is arbitrary, and so are proportions and size. Further, proportions and size almost always pass without notice; and if we notice them, they are without meaning. We notice proportions and size only when they are extreme, and their being extreme is all that we notice; we don't think about their meaning any more than when they are not extreme. Paintings that are compositions do not, in principle, interest me, and I am not alone in feeling this way. I do not want to make paintings that are compositions. I want to overcome the arbitrary that composition depends on—more than depends on, celebrates. There have to be reasons for my paintings to be as they are but I don't want those reasons to come from me; I want them to come from somewhere else. I am interested not in composition but in noncomposition. A way to overcome composition is the monochrome.

The monochrome – and it goes without saying that we assume the monochrome is rectangular – is for me an ideal. But if proportions and size are arbitrary in rectangular paintings of the usual kind, they are almost always just as arbitrary in a monochrome. And in the monochrome this arbitrariness is all the more unmistakable because there is no composition within the confines of the painting to distract you from the material facts about what you are looking at. In a monochrome, proportions and size are two of the few things to look at, so you pay attention to them as you otherwise would not. I was thinking about how to get away from the rectangle and how to overcome the arbitrary in composition and in proportions and size. I was attracted to the monochrome as a solution, but even in the monochrome these questions remain. A kind of painting that interests me is paintings made for specific architectural settings. Often the setting gives the painting both its size and its shape. The size and shape of a painting in a lunette are not what the artist chose, they were already determined by the architecture. An example is the Madonna del Sacco by del Sarto.

I had made notes that developed into the idea of making paintings that were the size of doors and windows. Such paintings were L-shaped, and they would be hung directly next to two sides of the door or window that, as I would say, made them. This idea combined the several things that interested me: the painting is not a rectangle; the painting's size and proportions are determined not by me; and to direct attention to the painting's size and shape it has to be a monochrome. The color had to be one that had the least meaning. The only possibility was middle gray. As Gerhard Richter said, gray is something that represents nothing. Further, the painting differs from almost all paintings that are portable objects in that you cannot put it wherever you want, for example, over the sofa. Because such a painting can go in only one place, it draws a further distinction with respect to paintings of the usual kind.

Then came the invitation from the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein. The main gallery downstairs had a door at either end and in one wall were four windows. The two doors and four windows in this room determined the number of the paintings and their overall heights and widths, that is, their sizes and their proportions. But there were still decisions to be made. One was which corner of the doors and windows the corresponding paintings were aligned with. For the doors, the choice was between the upper corners; for the windows, between all four corners. Another decision was the distance by which each painting was offset from the door or window that made it.

The principle of symmetry, consistent with the principle of noncomposition, made these decisions. I divided the paintings into two groups of three. In the group on the left, the door painting was to the right of its door and the two window paintings were to the left of their windows; in the group on the right, the two window paintings were to the right of their windows and the door painting was to the left of its door. Symmetry also ruled the remaining details: the alternation of the paintings' horizontal elements above and below the doors and windows; the paintings' vertical offsets from the doors and windows; and the horizontal offsets of the door paintings. The only exception was the horizontal offsets of the window paintings. The windows were not all the same size and were not equally spaced; the way to respond to this inequality was to make the horizontal offsets of the window paintings unequal. A painting of the usual kind requires a certain amount of empty wall around it. You wouldn't hang an ordinary painting near a door or window, and certainly not directly next to one. Whatever it is that keeps most paintings a certain distance from doors and windows, the Door and Window Paintings positively require to be hung directly next to them.

The paintings' being adjacent to a door or a window complicated your looking at them. Through the door or window that each painting was immediately next to you could see the real world: objects in space, color, light, movement. This contrast between the matte gray of the paintings and the world was particularly pronounced for the window paintings: outside the windows was an attractive garden. And depending on how bright the day was, the light coming in through the windows made it difficult to look at the paintings next to them. An extreme example of a painting with an unusual relation to a window, and one of my favorite paintings, is *Vertumnus and Pomona* by Pontormo.

It's a fresco that fills a lunette, except that in the middle there is a round window that with its decorative surrounding is so large it effectively divides the painting in two. When the painting is photographed for official purposes, a drapery is put over the window or the window is otherwise obscured, so that the light coming in through the window won't interfere with the exposure of the photograph.

When you see the painting under the usual conditions, there is no drapery over it. If it's a bright afternoon, the daylight coming through the window can be brighter than the light falling on the painting and so interferes with your being able to see it. A painting made for a particular architectural setting can sometimes be moved to another, and when this happens the painting's installation in the new setting customarily bears to it the same relation the painting had to the old. The obvious example is a ceiling painting. A more specific example is the frescoes Tiepolo painted on the pendentives in the Scalzi in Venice, which are now in the Accademia. Their installation in the upper corners of the gallery corresponds as closely to their original settings as a rectangular room permits.

Architectural features of a specific setting made the Door and Window Paintings, but they can be shown elsewhere. My first thought was that in a different location the paintings should have the same relations among themselves that they did at the NAK: the same distances from each other, the same heights above the floor. It would be all right if in effect the two end walls, the ones with the doors in them, were folded out flat into the plane of the wall with the windows, so that all six paintings could be on one wall. (In fact I did a screenprint for the NAK that showed the paintings in just this relation.) In any case, my idea was that the relative positions of the paintings should be preserved, in order to relate them as faithfully as possible to the place that made them and arranged them.

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The cubicle at Art Unlimited is substantially smaller than the room at the NAK, and while it has two doors, it has no windows. The question was how to adapt the placement of the Door and Window Paintings to the smaller space of the cubicle while remaining true to the underlying idea of the paintings, that the doors and windows at the NAK determined their size and their placement.

The door paintings presented few difficulties. The height of the modular panels of which the cubicle is constructed is less than the height of the doors at the NAK, but Art Unlimited was able to construct doors of the right height. The standard width of the doors in the cubicle was by chance within a centimeter of the width of the doors at the NAK. The panel construction prevented the doors from being the same distances from the corners that they were at the NAK. I had no choice but to live with these discrepancies.

The window paintings were another matter. Because the cubicle has no windows, it was essential to place the paintings such that their locations faithfully recalled the locations of the windows at the NAK that gave them their dimensions and placed them. At the NAK, all four window paintings were on the same wall. Here that wasn't possible, because the wall wasn't long enough.

The solution was to divide the paintings into the two groups that I mention above, a door painting and two window paintings in each group, and to locate each group in relation to a corner, just as the two groups at the NAK were each located in relation to a corner. At the NAK the two groups were at opposite ends of the same wall, but here, because the wall wasn't long enough, the two groups had to be located in relation to corners that are diagonally opposite each other. There is a door painting on each of the two short walls, and located in relation to each door painting are two window paintings, two on one long wall and two on the other. The door

that you enter from Carl Andre's space corresponds to the door into the room at the NAK. In this corner are a door painting and two window paintings. The two window paintings are placed in relation to the corner just as they were in relation to the corresponding corner at the NAK: they are the same distance from the corner that they were at the NAK and the same height above the floor. Their locations tell you precisely where in relation to the corner the windows were that gave the paintings their dimensions and placed them. The door painting is located less precisely in relation to the corner: the door here is a centimeter narrower than the door at the NAK and the distance from the door to the corner is less than it was at the NAK.

The relations among the paintings in the second group, located in the corner diagonally opposite the first group, are more complicated. The paintings' being in the diagonally opposite corner reverses from side to side their positions relative to what they were at the NAK. The door is toward the right end of the wall instead of the left, and the window paintings are on the wall to the right of the door instead of to the left. As it was at the NAK, the door is closer to its corner than the first door at the NAK was to its corner. But as with the first door in the cubicle, the panel construction prevents this door from being the same distance from the corner that it was at the NAK.

Under this reversal from side to side, the second door painting is, in relation to its position at the NAK, on the wrong side of the door. At the NAK it was on the left side of the door; here it should be on the right. But this is not possible; it's a discrepancy we must live with.

At the NAK both of the window paintings in this second group were on the right of their windows. Here, because of the side-to-side reversal, they should be on the left of where their windows would be. But as with the door painting, this isn't possible.

Since the window paintings couldn't go on the left of where their windows would be, my first thought was the obvious one, to put the paintings on the right. At least the positions of the window paintings in relation to their windows would be as wrong as the door painting is in relation to its door. But this uniformity in being on the wrong side of the door and windows, consistent in itself, would still be wrong in relation to the side-to-side reversal that the transposition along the diagonal imposes on the three paintings in this corner. For the window paintings, the absence of the reversal would leave unexplained the disproportionately narrow vertical element of the painting that is nearest the corner. The window at the NAK that gave this painting its dimensions was so close to the corner that the vertical element of the painting had to be this narrow. When this element is away from the corner, as it would be if the two paintings in this corner were on the right of their windows instead of the left, as they would be without the reversal, you don't understand why the element is so narrow; it runs the risk of seeming arbitrary.

The solution was to align these two paintings not with the two sides of the windows that they were aligned with at the NAK, but with the two sides that are opposite. Move the painting that is nearest the corner of the cubicle from the right side and bottom of the window to the left side and top of the window; move the second painting from the right side and top of the window to the left side and bottom. Now the narrow vertical element of the painting nearest the corner is to the left of where the window would be, as it should be in accordance with the regime of reversal from side to side. Its being on the left, closer to the corner, shows you in a directly visual way that at the NAK the painting was fitted into the narrow space between the window and the corner. And correspondingly, the vertical element of the second painting is to the left of where the window would be, reversed, as it should be, from its position at the NAK.

Both paintings are, in relation to their orientation at the NAK, upside down. But is this important? The paintings themselves don't tell you that they're upside down, and in this orientation they still tell you as precisely where the windows are in relation to the corner. Their being monochromes permits just this kind of transposition. Rather than even say that the paintings are upside down, I should say they're inverted. "Upside down" implies a self-evident mistake, while "inverted" does not. The paintings grant the liberty to manipulate them in this way and they remains essentially the same. (The fact that the paintings can be inverted without anyone noticing suggests to me that even though the paintings accurately represent the dimensions of the doors and windows at the NAK, they are at the same time abstract.) Further, this inversion of the two window paintings locates them nearer the corner, which helps to make clearer the diagonal relation between the corners and the reversal from side to side that comes from it.

Adapting the placement of the paintings to the cubicle required that I abandon the symmetry of the installation at the NAK. At first I was unhappy about this, but I finally realized it was not the loss I thought it was. In making the paintings for the NAK I had relied on symmetry to get rid of having to make compositional decisions. At Art Unlimited, the constraints of the cubicle all but ruled out decisions about placement, that is, decisions about composition. The arrangement of the paintings here is, all things considered, the only possible one.

In adapting the placement of the paintings to the cubicle at Art Unlimited I came to realize how differently the paintings could be arranged from how they were at the NAK and still preserve their relations to the architecture of the space that made them. Despite the transformation of the arrangement of the paintings one to another in the cubicle (including inverting two of them), and despite the loss of symmetry in the relations among the paintings, the relations among the doors and windows in the space at the NAK remain in essence inscribed here, if in a form from which the viewer can construct those relations only by visualizing.

The arrangement at Art Unlimited, in being the only possible one, is even less of a composition than the arrangement was at the NAK. Here it is closer to the ideal of noncomposition that I had wanted from the beginning.

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