The Longing for Order: Painting as the Gatekeeper of Harmony

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ARoS and the Art of the Future

"Why do museums and collectors continue to give high priority to painting? Is it because painting is intensively promoted commercially, i.e. in galleries and at art fairs? Or is it because many museums and collections are already, by virtue of their institutional history, specially geared to exhibiting paintings?"¹ These questions were posed to me when asked to write this essay. So naturally, as a curator in one of the country’s largest art museums, I had to make it my first task to find out how many paintings ARoS had bought over recent years. The number was quite surprising. Since we moved to a new and much larger building in 2004 – on the same occasion changing our name from Aarhus Kunstmuseum to ARoS – we have bought two paintings during a period of one and a half year. One of these, by Robert Rauschenberg, was created on the basis of a photograph. By comparison, we have acquired fifteen photographs, three videos and two installations over the same period of time.

However, if we take a tour of our collection – which covers the period from the end of the eighteenth century to the present day – it will be discovered that painting represents such a substantial part of it that the history of art seems almost exclusively to be based on paintings. But while, by the very nature of things, the oldest part of the collection consists of art in the traditional media, the more recent part of the collection contains a far larger representation of new art forms – photography, installation art, video, etc. This puts the massive presence of painting into perspective.
The exhibition gallery The 9 Spaces on the bottom floor of the museum exclusively shows art of a high international standard by artists such as Bill Viola, Pipilotti Rist, James Turrell and Tony Oursler. It should be noted that this part of the museum is dedicated solely to art that has been defined as something other than painting in its traditional form: video, light, installations, objects, space.

For although, by virtue of its broadly based collection, AROs naturally continues to focus on painting as the most common historical form of artistic expression – and possesses a broadly based and striking collection of more recent, young painting – there is also implicit in the museum's identity a clear desire to create an optimal framework for new kinds of art. With its high ceilings, flexible walls and the presence of The 9 Spaces, the museum is founded on the realisation that the role of the museum has changed: While The White Cube defined and constituted the framework par excellence for painting, The Black Box – which is also implicit in The 9 Spaces – and, most importantly, the idea of flexibility have become the background to and premise for the art of the future. It is on the basis of this recognition that The 9 Spaces and the museum's general approach to new art forms have come into being.

ARoS is far from being the only museum where architecture and ideology are intended to place the new art forms – or the “Art of the Future” as we also call it – in a broader museum context. In Japan, the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art at Kanazawa, which opened in 2004, is built in a circular shape and based on spatial principles that invite installation art rather than traditional painting. And in 2003 the Dia Art Foundation opened the museum Dia: Beacon, Riggio Galleries close to the Hudson River in Beacon. The museum exclusively mounts large formats from the Dia collection, and although it contains numerous paintings, its permanent exhibitions are experienced as spatial installations rather than as paintings exhibited in a classical, linear progression.

The Premise of Discussing Painting in a Museum Context

An important premise for discussing the role of painting within the context of the art institution is how painting is dealt with. The traditional division between different media as the core of the museum leaves no room for discussing different kinds of paintings as well as the idea of "painting in the expanded field". When registering the art objects of a museum collection, painting is defined as a square, flat surface covered with paint and either figurative or abstract in content. An installation, on the other hand, is regarded as something spatial. For example, the work Limelight from 1987 by the Danish artist Peter Bonde, which consists of numerous paintings installed in a space circling two golden objects is registered as an installation in the AROs collection. In a theoretical discussion, one could, of course, argue that Peter Bonde's work is an early example of painting in the expanded field. Within the museum, however, we still deal with the traditional categories.

So this essay will not focus on painting from the view of an artistic practice, nor from an exclusively theoretically based position. Rather, it will try to sketch out the traditional role of painting in the art museum both regarded as a physical object and as a concept deeply rooted in the identity of the art museum and the museum visitor. And, as mentioned above, defined in the Greenbergian sense as a square, flat surface covered with paint and either figurative or abstract in content.

By dividing painting and installations into categories rather than actual works, this essay will focus on the expanded curatorial field rather than attempt to analyse the artistic field by polemically caricaturing the positions of the art forms. The traditional painting within the art institution seems to possess a certain set of codes that defines both the curatorial approach and the reception of it by the public. And this is deeply embedded in the art institution.

Painting – a Sure Winner in the Museum of Contemporary Art?

Is painting given higher priority than new art forms in the art institution, as indicated in the introduction to this anthology? I have neither collected statistical information nor made a closer analysis of the purchasing policies of museums either in Denmark or abroad. So I cannot unreservedly start out from the assumption that museums basing themselves on contemporary art aim as much at new art forms as at painting. Nor can I claim with any certainty that in several cases they acquire installations, photography and video in far greater numbers than paintings.

Besides, I do not have any basis on which to maintain that the role of painting in an institutional and museum context appears to be based on an art-historical necessity. Indeed, I cannot even postulate that the rumour of the central role of painting on the stage of the art institution is
greatly exaggerated, and that museum visitors of today may find painting just a little bit boring and at best rather old-fashioned in relation to the spectacular and sensational expression of installation and video art.

Instead, from the position of the art institution, I can attempt to pin down the role of painting in an institutional context, which has changed dramatically over recent years. For if we maintain that painting today is part of a wider field, this is surely to a great extent due to the fact that painting has accepted and adopted the more recent art forms, including photography, video and installation art. At the same time, the virtual, digitalised world that has been created with the advent of the computer has sharpened the visual sense of the viewer and opened the eye to a spatial and interactive virtual world that is far beyond the quite limited means of traditional painting defined as a square, flat surface covered with paint and either figurative or abstract in content. Therefore, viewers have started to behave differently towards art as a result of their encounter with the new artistic genres that demand a physical, visual and cognitive approach of a quite different kind.

By comparing two of the exhibitions that have been mounted in AROS I want to analyse how the museum is dealing with painting in a curatorially expanded field. On the one hand, I want to look at painting and, on the other, at installation art from an institutional and reception-based position. The spatial, reception-based and institutional qualities of the two art forms are analysed on the basis of the thesis that both painting’s exhibitive qualities and its relation to the public – that is, its context and its reception – have been strikingly influenced by the so-called new art forms.

And this ultimately means that painting does not only find itself in an expanded field from the point of view of the artist, but has also in an institutional and reception-based – and ultimately curatorial – sense crystallised into an expanded field that raises questions about the traditional categories on which most museums are based.

**Pop Classics**

I will now turn to two examples of exhibitions at AROS, each of them representing different curatorial approaches. The first, *Pop Classics*, retains the iconic status of painting and the viewer’s reception and interaction with the works within the strictly defined form of *The White Cube*. The second, Olafur Eliasson: *Minding the World*, challenges and shatters the autonomy of the viewer’s reception and offers a new relationship between art and viewer. Finally, the show entitled Michael Kortum: *Juywalking Eyes* is briefly introduced since it works with painting in the manner of an installation and so, roughly speaking, transfers the experiences of installation art into the world of painting.

The first temporary exhibition to be mounted in AROS shortly after the opening of the museum in the spring of 2004 was *Pop Classics*, showing works from Museum Ludwig in Cologne. Even the title of the exhibition indicated that it was to be seen as a "classic" with works that have been accorded iconic status in their own time. Artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns...
were the stars in the parade of modern masterpieces that made up the contents of the exhibition. The exhibition was put on display in the gallery in the museum that is reserved for temporary exhibitions, a gallery which, with seven metres to the ceiling, a long curving outside wall, and polished concrete floors, has a very contemporary look. This exhibition gallery was divided into rectangular rooms and lengthy sections of wall, all of which were painted white.

While the installations – for instance Kienholz's *The Portable War Memorial* from 1968 and Rosenquist's *Horse Blinders* from 1968-69 – were exhibited in specially designed rooms, the paintings were hung at eye level. Careful account was taken of the hanging and the lighting on the individual works as well as the way in which the walls were divided. At the same time, works requiring interactivity – for instance Rauschenberg's *Soundings* from 1968 – created a living, dynamic exhibition gallery. Nevertheless, the hanging must be viewed as 'classic', starting out from *The White Cube*, and as such emblematic of the way in which the vast majority of museums deal with art, especially painting. *Pop Classics* was neither radical nor controversial – it was well within the clearly defined framework of the White Cube. The catalogue, on the other hand, was created with a boundary-crossing layout and represented a radical breach with the traditional form of the exhibition catalogue.

Viewed historically, the paintings of Pop art are defined precisely by openness and receptiveness to popular culture. The images of other media – strip cartoons, press photographs, etc. – combine directly with the unique authenticity of painting, and it is this very tension that is at the bottom of Pop art's enormous importance in the history of art. But today the paintings of Pop art have become a kind of post-modern classics. Just like Picasso, Matisse and van Gogh, the best-known Pop artists, who all have painting in common, take the great exhibitions all over the world by storm.

So considered from the point of view of reception, the paintings of Pop art appear to demand a familiar manner of behaviour. As viewers, we approach Pop art on the basis of a series of acquired norms that are already embedded in our body when we enter the museum. The manageable size of the paintings, the serial hanging, the progressive sequence that is indicated by the linear presentation of the rectangular canvases – all these parameters require a viewer whose body has been geared beforehand to the experience of painting. And the body carries out a well-known performative practice. We move more slowly; we stop and we study selected paintings, and the viewer's path through the exhibition gallery is defined beforehand by the meticulous placing on the walls – a path that tells a continuous story. It is here that the paintings become icons, *masterpieces*. Phenomenologically viewed, the subject is separated from the object and still possesses its autonomy. This safe and familiar behaviour when faced with a painting that reflects the autonomy of the subject and ensures its unity can, however, result in new insights because of the familiarity of the situation.

**Olafur Eliasson: Minding the World**

The museum's next temporary exhibition presented works by the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, who works with installations of widely different kinds. The exhibition was based on the work with which Eliasson was represented in the Danish Pavilion in the Venice Biennial 2003, which I curated. However, it adopted a completely different form in Århus, as Eliasson's works are based on a close study of the place in which they are to be shown. *Minding the world* was the title given to it – and the very ambiguity residing in the word 'minding' was essential to Eliasson, who regards the viewer as the creator of meaning: the sense of 'taking care of' or 'being bothered by' Eliasson's work depended on the individual's eye.

The exhibition was in the form of a total installation engaging different sense registers in the viewer and actively bringing in the public as co-creators. For example, in one of Eliasson's best known works, *Yellow corridor*, it was the viewer's retina that created the complementary colour that emerged at the sight of the monochrome yellow light. The 'work' was not somewhere out there in the world, but in the viewer's own eye. Apart from the *Yellow corridor*, the exhibition contained, among other things, an artificial waterfall, a camera obscura, a rainbow – again created in the eye of the beholder – a gigantic gallery of mirrors with a floor of lava, a huge sculpture of mirrors created of kaleidoscopic shapes, a room filled with geometric bricks made from compacted earth, and several movable light works. *The cubic structural evolution project*, which was exhibited in the museum's Junior Section, was an enormous table with a mirror surface that was filled with white Lego bricks. It was then up to the public to arrange the Lego bricks. The 'work', however, was not the final shape that
the Lego bricks produced, for the shapes were constantly being broken down and transformed. No, the work was the situation.

Whereas the visitors in their meeting with the Pop Classics exhibition were physically geared to the massive presence of painting in a traditional hanging, the encounter with Olafur Eliasson’s exhibition was one prolonged challenge and a dismantling of the viewer’s expectations: The Yellow corridor robbed viewers of their sense of colour, while the imposing gallery with its patterned lava floor and mirrored ceiling demanded a quite different physical action. The sense of space, orientation and linear perspective was dissolved by the body being suspended between the geometrical patterns in the lava floor and the extensive mirrored ceiling. Thus it was not an autonomous, complete self. The "I" was IN THE PICTURE – if we quote Lacan’s anecdote about seeing a sardine tin in the river as forming the basis of his theory of the gaze (Lacan 1973: 69). And people were not singular subjects, but inseparable from a collective, formed by and in constant interaction with their surroundings.

In the meeting with Eliasson’s total installation, there were no well-known patterns of movement or familiar systems into which the experience could be channelled. On the contrary, most people visiting the exhibition were unprepared for what they would experience. For here people sensed and experienced something they had never experienced before. And the insight was not, as had been the case with Pop art, formed by knowledge, insight and familiarity with the work of art presented in a traditional way, but on the contrary based on physical and visual experience, sensation and interaction. Viewed phenomenologically, the body of the viewer was not part of an autonomous self that defined the relationship between the work of art and the viewer. On the contrary, the body of the viewer was exactly the tool generating and shaping the artistic experience.

The Characteristics of Curating and Experiencing Traditional Painting and New Installations

By comparing the two exhibitions, one might be able to find some of the characteristics that define the curatorial approach to traditional painting and new installation art as well as the visitor’s approach to two distinctly different curatorial strategies. Whereas painting in the way it was exhibited in the show Pop Classics confirmed the viewer’s general cultural
education because of the rectangular, linear hanging, installation art in the form of Olafur Eliasson's exhibition took all acquired cultural education. Whereas the painting, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense, became linear when it was hung together with other paintings in *Pop Classics*, the installations by Eliasson were exclusively spatially orientated.

If for a moment we allow ourselves to regard painting in the way defined by Greenberg as "the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment", we might be able, as an experiment, to see the argumentation of this comparative analysis from the point of view of the spectator. Thus one could set out the positive characteristics of painting as the following: In a world that is defined by the economics of experience – rather than meditation – painting is outstandingly anti-spectacular. Painting guarantees authenticity, intimacy and a sensual presence that might seem to be needed in an age characterised by a culture of digitalised, virtual and infinitely reproducible images. In this latter case, the fact that we are familiar with the painting makes it into a phenomenon that we welcome with the feeling of security resulting from custom, and which we decode and absorb at lightning speed. As such, it becomes the gatekeeper of harmony.

On the other hand, the anti-spectacularity of painting also forms the problem of experiencing painting. We have seen it so often that we are neither spellbound by it, nor are we exposed to new insights in our meeting with a medium that both via physical experience and on a cognitive level has become part of us.

So, viewed radically, one could line up the following schism between painting and installation art, provided we allow ourselves to regard them as traditional *categories* rather than actual works: Whereas a painting encourages physical stability, installation art is physically challenging. Whereas a painting is based on acquired habits, installation art is innovative. Whereas painting is static, installation art is mobile. Whereas painting ensures the autonomy of the subject, installation art fundamentally considers the subject as something relative. Whereas painting is an autonomous unity, installation art is based on interaction. And, finally, whereas painting is old-fashioned when seen through the optics of lifestyle, installation art is simply *sexier*.

Seen in relation to installation art, painting is both boring and authentic, both static and intimate, both anti-spectacular and present. But on the other hand, to be boring, static and anti-spectacular is also what defines art as the opposite of commercials and entertainment. And this is the schism of traditional painting within the art institution.

**Painting as Installation?**

Now, it is always dangerous to think in terms of essential characteristics when one deals with visual art. For, of course, some paintings are spectacular and some installations are static. There are paintings that completely suspend all connection with the history of painting, and there are installations that constitute a direct extension of the painting tradition. An individual painting can have more in common with installation art, video art, photography or even with net-based art than its media-specific fellows. And to me this seems to be the essential premise of discussing painting today in the context of the art institution. So there are far more sides to this discussion than I have touched on.

For not only has contemporary painting adopted the new visualities and expanded the field of painting – as is for example the case with the Danish artist John Kørner, whose painterly practice is surely as much installation as painting – but also the actual approach to painting as a *square, flat surface covered with paint and either figurative or abstract in content* has changed. If we view a painting by Rauschenberg after going through Olafur Eliasson's exhibition, I venture to assert that the painting will be viewed through an optic that has been slightly changed and met with a body that has experienced itself in a new and different way.

As a museum we have a duty to absorb these experiences – at least in our dealings with contemporary art. The exhibition *Michael Kvium: Jaywalking Eyes* at AroS in 2006 shows an artist whose paintings are characterised by a figurative, traditional expression rooted as far back as the masters of the seventeenth century, so one can really speak of a *square, flat surface covered with paint and figurative in content*. However, in the exhibition these paintings, or which there are over a hundred, were presented in a quite new way. They were hung without reference to chronology and thus avoided the common curatorial approach to painting as something to be experienced in a linear way. In various places they extended from floor to ceiling in expressive, mosaic-like hangings, while elsewhere they had coloured background walls and were accompanied by specially laid carpets. In this case, the physical sense of locality is put
out of action, preparing the ground for a spatial and physical disorientation that challenges the subject's autonomy.

The experiences resulting from the expanded field of art influence both the creation and reception of contemporary painting. So of course there is a certain tension between painting and the other art forms within the museum institution – a tension I consider very productive indeed. However, I do not believe that it is because of anything as profane as determined gallery owners or art fairs that painting plays an important part in museums today – as suggested by some critics [see citation in the beginning of the article and note 1]. Of course, if you press a gallery owner and ask why painting circulates so much in the art system, the explanation will probably be that painting is transferable – limited in size, with decorative qualities, and yet quite unique here in the age of technological reproduction. If you ask a museum representative, on the other hand, the explanation will refer less to the marketing and financial implications and more to the maintaining of an unambiguous history that is suited to general communication, that is, that painting simply fits into a long historical perspective.

The paradox, then, is that – as far as I can see – not a great deal of contemporary painting is bought and exhibited in museums of contemporary art. What is bought and exhibited is work by artists who have attained iconic or classic status on the art scene – from Picasso to Polke with Georgia O'Keeffe as the only woman; but this is less because they are painters than due to their role in the history of art. To me, the tension between the art forms in our extreme visual culture, creating viewers with a much more expanded visuality than the one defined by the curatorial approach of the white cube, is the most interesting aspect in the contemporary museum. And to my mind the main task of museums is to stretch the canvas and set the stage for this tension and the encounter that is being enacted between these different art forms and visualities. Thus, for curators the focus must be on preparing the ground for a new visuality without any prejudices of media-specificity.

Note

1 Call for papers, Contemporary Painting in Context, section 3: "Painting, Institutions, Market".