

Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Visual Art and Culture

EDITED BY CARLA TABAN

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9
INTRODUCTION	11
Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Visual Art and Culture CARLA TABAN	11
1. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: RESHAPING APPROACHES TO IMAGE STUDY	41
Works of Art as Meta-Images: On the Use of Photographs for the Study of Art History JORGELINA ORFILA	43
Picturing the Frame: An Aesthetic Approach to Film Studies Case Study of <i>The Age of Innocence</i> (Scorsese 1993) STELLA HOCKENHULL	61
Bill Viola's Synthetic Atlases MAGDALENA NOWAK	79
2. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: RETHINKING THE WAYS WE THINK ABOUT THE IMAGE	97
The Image in Its Absence JOHANNA MALT	99
Configurations of Emptiness: Intericonic Blanks in Louise Lawler's <i>A Movie without the Picture</i> and Hiroshi Sugimoto's <i>Theaters</i> ELISABETH-CHRISTINE GAMER	115
The Image by Itself: Photography and Its Double VANGELIS ATHANASSOPOULOS	133

3. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: MAKING VISIBLE THE APPEARANCE INTO VIEW 149

Mel Bochner's Perspective Photographs and the Modernist Conditions of Visibility 151
ANAËL LEJEUNE

Deleuzian Meta-Cinematic Images in Ilya Kabakov's "Total Installation" 169
SOTIRIOS BAHTSETZIS

Re-Inscriptions: Microscopy of Time and Motion 189
OLGA MOSKATOVA

4. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: REVEALING THE IDEOLOGICAL DENSITY OF IMAGES 207

Images against Images: On Goshka Macuga's *The Nature of the Beast* 209
MAFALDA DÂMASO

Beyond Simulation: Inter-Textuality, Inter-Imaging and Pastiche in *The Artist* (Hazanavicius 2011) 227
FRAN PHEASANT-KELLY

5. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: VISUALISING THE INVISIBLE, CONCEALING THE VISIBLE 245

Generating New Epistemological Coordinates: Roberto Matta's Open Cubes as Meta-Images 247
MAAHEEN AHMED

How Does a Snail See the World? Imagining Non-Human Animals' Visual *Umwelten* 263
CONCEPCIÓN CORTÉS ZULUETA

Mimesis, Coding, Programming: Considerations on the Meta-Image and the Microcontroller in Contemporary New Media Art 281
ABIGAIL SUSIK

6. META- AND INTER-IMAGES: HIGHLIGHTING THE PERMEABILITY OF MEDIUMS/A	299
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'Navigation' by the 'Vernacular Glance': Robert Rauschenberg's 'Maps' AMANDA GLUIBIZZI	301
--	-----

<i>Everything Is Purged from This Painting but Art.</i> John Baldessari: Meta-Picture and Post-Mediality, 1966-1968 RAPHAËL PIRENNE	315
---	-----

On Exactitude in Modeling: Mimesis and Meta-Image in <i>Dolorès</i> by Anne Baltus, François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters FABRICE LEROY	331
--	-----

AUTHORS	349
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present volume originates in the session “Meta- and Inter-Images in Art” that took place at The 9th International Conference on Word and Image in Montreal (Canada) in August 2011. However, only five of the twelve papers selected for that occasion were subsequently developed by their authors into full-fledged essays to be included here. To these, twelve further chapters were added following a refereed call for contributions.

While all the articles in the present collection were written specifically for it, they tackle issues of long-term interest to their authors. Both junior and seasoned scholars’ reflexions in the following pages are best understood in light of their past or on-going larger research projects. As is the case for all continuing preoccupations, different angles of approach, different aspects to focus on, different background contexts against which the matter to be understood projects more clearly are constantly tested. This is not to say that the essays in this volume cannot stand by themselves, for they perfectly can, but rather an invitation to discover all their breadth and depth by reading the authors’ other writings.

To use a descriptive metaphor, the seventeen participants in this project have arrived at the meeting point of *Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Visual Art and Culture* starting from different places, travelling by different ways and in different manners. Whatever they have to say about the topic which represents their here and now not only offers a multiplicity of perspectives on it, but can be best grasped in relationship with the specific conditions informing each of these perspectives.

I would like to thank all contributors for their journey, for considering *Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Visual Art and Culture* a worthy gathering point and for shedding their lights on it. At Leuven University Press I acknowledge with gratitude Veerle De Laet and Beatrice Van Eeghem for their editorial expertise and the two external reviewers for their valuable suggestions.

CARLA TABAN

Toronto, May 2013

MEL BOCHNER'S PERSPECTIVE PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE MODERNIST CONDITIONS OF VISIBILITY

ANAËL LEJEUNE

It is easy to get angry at the closedness of formalism, but very little examination is ever made of its premises.

(Bochner, 1969: 57)

In an essay published in March 1967 entitled “Perverse Perspectives”, the art critic Lucy R. Lippard examined the interest recently shown by a series of American artists for perspective experimentations and illusionism. Focusing mainly on abstract painters in the wake of Op Art, she described how their geometric compositions caused visual distortions by leading the viewer to live the paradoxical and dazzling experience of seeing depth and planeness at the same time. Of secondary interest and yet worth mentioning, according to Lippard, is that this recent abstract illusionist tendency should be seen as a transitional phase, that is to say as an attempt to expand the possibilities of painting after a number of years of formal reductionism promoted by modernism. Still, if this new abstract illusionism challenged the flat surface of painting, it never abandoned the modernist assertion of the picture plane, for, as she wrote, “it distorts and reconstructs that plane outside of the conventions of depth simulation” (28). In other words, these paintings still relied on the modernist flatness they seemed to deny at first sight, and failed to overstep the boundaries of the formalist modernist theory associated with it.

What we would like to consider in this contribution is the way in which these issues of flatness and perspective have been simultaneously addressed by another American artist, Mel Bochner, in a far more complex way. With regard to a series of works produced by the artist in 1967, we would like to bring attention to Bochner’s use of the motif of linear perspective and try to grasp the critical dimension it might have possessed vis-à-vis the dominant art theory of his time and place, namely formalist modernism whose chief proponents were the American critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. For we believe that Bochner succeeded in challenging modernism not by reintroducing boldly perspectival illusionism in reaction against pure flatness, but by showing thanks to the metaphor of linear perspective embodied in his work that this art theory implied conditions of visibility imposing limits upon artistic creation – and how the awareness of these conditions of visibility must underlie any attempt to challenge this theory.

• Double Negation

In 1967, Mel Bochner created a series of photographic pieces in which he examined the convention of linear perspective.¹ The first work dealing explicitly with this motif is *Perspective: One Point (Positive)*. This black and white photograph depicts a lattice of orthogonal lines receding toward a vanishing point located outside the framework beyond the upper edge of the print. To create this picture, Mel Bochner covered a table with strips of black tape forming a perfect grid. He then had a photographer shoot the grid from one end of the table at an oblique angle so that nothing else appears in the frame. Thanks to the distortions caused by the photographic device of the camera and to the high contrast adjustment in the printing, Bochner created a strict linear perspective diagram that induced an effect of receding depth – the artist incidentally demonstrating how the photographic apparatus complies in its structure with the traditional system of spatial construction by linear perspective, as Hubert Damisch had just noticed a few years earlier (1963: 70-72). Using the same setup, Mel Bochner made a second photograph that would disrupt the spatial illusion, *Perspective: Two Point (Negative)* (1967). This time, Bochner had the photographer shoot the taped grid diagonally from one corner of the table. Combining the perspective effect induced by the lens, on the one hand, with the diagonal lines induced by the angle of view, on the other hand, this second diagram displaces the single vanishing point structure of the first piece in favor of a double vanishing point system. This results in a shallower and more tenuous depth, since the web drawn by the orthogonal lines alludes to a frontal abstract rhombohedral structure. In this regard, a third photograph combining the first two strategies confirms the artist's interest in the tension between depth and flatness, while being somewhat more complex. *Perspective Insert (Two in One)* [Fig. 1] consists in the inset of the central section cut from the two-point perspective photograph into a negative print of the first single vanishing point perspective photograph.

The cut-out of *Perspective: Two Point (Negative)* alludes to an overhead view of a parallelogram and resists somewhat more than the rest of the photograph the illusive effect of depth. But, as Scott Rothkopf has aptly observed (27), whereas one would have expected the visual confrontation with the one-perspective background to strengthen this frontality, a more complex visual effect occurs. Insofar as the convergence of the sides of the parallelogram is stronger than the convergence of the orthogonals of the background, it is the cut-out that appears to recede at a higher rate, in the very center of the image, while the background seems to come to the fore. As a result, this intertwining effect of depth and flatness causes visual tensions quite difficult to assimilate for the beholder. In other words, Mel Bochner strives here to produce linear perspective diagrams that actually disturb their very primary function, namely to convey an impression of depth on a flat surface. But the artist's reflection on this paradox goes further, as another piece testifies.

To create *Convex Perspective*, another photograph of this 1967 series, Bochner first applied a taped grid on a convex corner of his studio formed by two walls meeting at right angle. A photograph was then shot with the camera aiming at the apex of the corner so that the horizontal lines of the grid appear as orthogonals receding towards two opposed vanishing points located to the left and to the right. The photograph was shot so that the two vanishing points were located on a same horizontal line crossing perpendicularly the edge of the corner at mid-height. Finally, the inversion of the black and white colors and the contrast adjustment of the negative printing rendered the vertical edge of the corner almost invisible. In the final photograph, the black geometric shapes of the central area look as if they were not affected

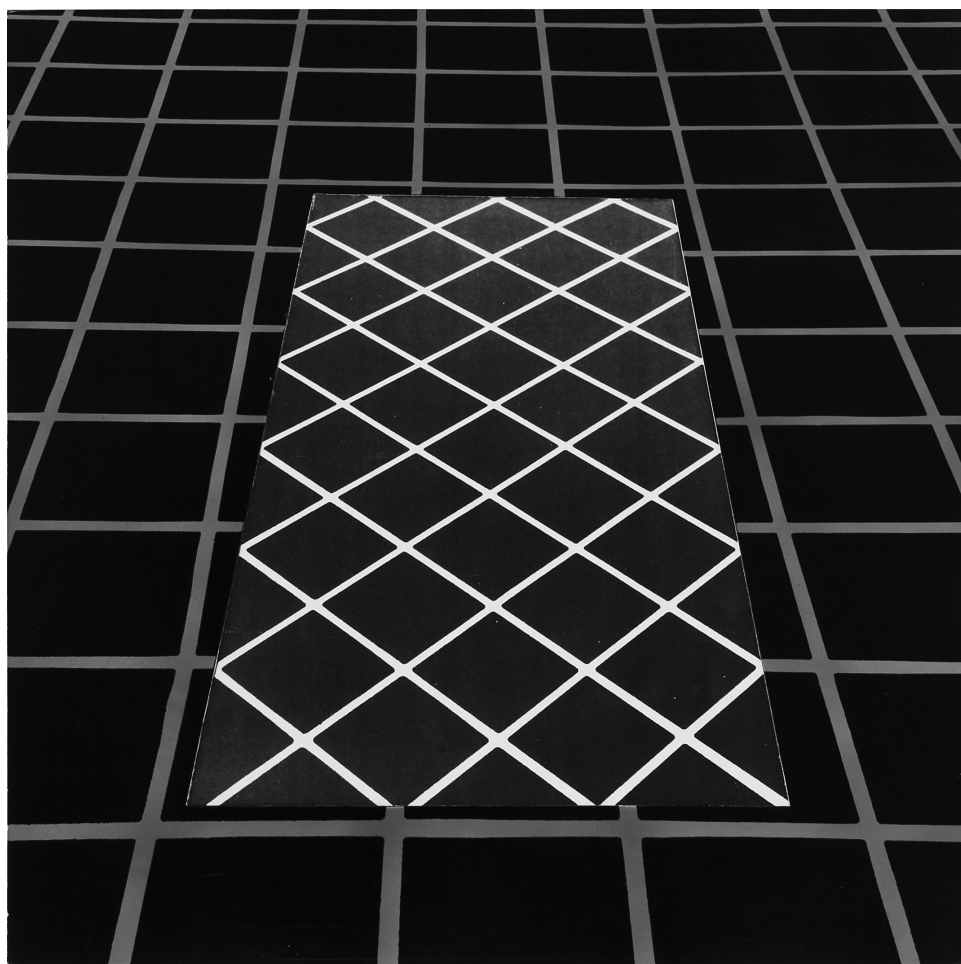


Fig. 1 | Mel Bochner. *Perspective Insert (Two In One): Color* [Maquette]. 1967. Spray lacquer on gelatin silver print on board, 21.5 x 21.5 inches. Courtesy Mel Bochner ©

by any perspective distortion at all. The two central shapes are like perfect squares the flatness of which disturbs the general illusionism of the whole image. Without going into the details of an extended psycho-physiological explanation, we can nevertheless notice that Bochner's photograph illustrates a particular phenomenon of visual perception, the so-called 'multistable images' in which ambiguous single patterns give rise to different interpretations. At the time, this type of images was well studied by the Gestalt psychologists whose theories were quite popular among artists in the 1960s.² As Gestalt theoreticians would argue, a shape or pattern is seen in such a way that the resulting structure is the simplest one that the perceptual conditions allow. For instance, the projection of a cube will be perceived either as an irregular plane figure or as a solid tilted in depth depending on the fact that symmetry is more easily and immediately achievable in two- or three-dimensions (Arnheim, 1954: 249-252).³ In line with this theory, it is such a perceptual phenomenon that leads the central shapes of Bochner's frontal photographic view of the grid to be seen as plane figures, whereas the other areas are seen in a more compelling way as undistorted shapes tilted in three dimensions, thus causing instability in the picture.

Thanks to these various strategies, Bochner created what might be called a 'double negation' in his photographic images. Indeed, a first negation consists in denying the flat surface of the material support through linear perspective. A second negation consists in denying the illusive depth created through the construction of this perspective itself, thus opacifying the representational space and causing the visual re-emergence of the flatness within the illusionistic space.⁴ But one has to notice that this re-emergence of flatness, that is to say the transgression of depth, is an effect of the operation of perspective itself. In this way, the artist causes a local suspension of illusion in favor of a designation of its own material conditions, its material support. In this regard then, Bochner's perspectival works may be thought to belong to the category of 'metapictures' proposed by W. J. T. Mitchell, that is to say a picture that reflects on itself, referring to its own making, nature, procedures, etc. and thereby constructing a "second-order discourse about pictures without recourse to language" (1994: 35-82). "For me", Bochner confirms,

the problem is one of knowledge. You see, I only work in order to learn something about art. Knowledge is intransitive, that is, it has no objective. But at some point one needs to enter into the world what he feels he knows. As I am a visual artist the demonstrations take form in the domain of visibility (1973: 108).

• Transparency and Opacity

Considering now the realm of art theory, one ought to pay attention to the particular and systematic interest someone like French philosopher and art historian Louis Marin showed in works of art of the early modern period that similarly uncovered their own material conditions within the representational space. Indeed, Marin elaborated a theoretical model in which this opacity becomes an inherent feature of the very principle of representation that it nevertheless negates. For, asserts Louis Marin, if Alberti's famous metaphor states that a painting is like an open window on the world, that is to say, if the viewer contemplates the scene depicted by the picture *as if* looking at the 'real' world *through* a transparent plane, what the painting actually bears on its surface is but the image or the reflection of this world. Hence the window is a mirror, or, to put it differently, it is a reflexive and reflecting material screen or surface on which and owing to which 'real' objects can appear. Therefore, Marin suggests, representation is only possible through the negation of this material surface the invisibility of which is the *condition of possibility* of the world represented.⁵ Yet, Marin seems to imply, no work of art exists that does not de-conceal to some degree this condition of possibility, that it so say that does not reveal this reflexivity.

If it is unlikely that Mel Bochner aimed at developing such a theoretical model of representation, it is however not inconceivable to suggest that his photographic works just mentioned bring about the perspective transparency and its transgression as a *system* in a similar way. Suffice it to remark that a few months later Bochner realized a couple of photographic works addressing this particular issue, *Transparent Plane #1* and *Transparent Plane #2* (both from 1968). Each of them consists in a pair of color polaroids showing a glass sheet propped horizontally on four small black cubes and on which Bochner sketched a loose grid in water. (In *Transparent Plane #2*, iodine has been dripped onto the water and, as a result, the grid appears less obviously).⁶ One of the two photographs shows a bird's-eye view of this simple device, while the second one shows a blurred close-up of the glass plane presented as a material, murky surface. Therefore, not only do these photographs refer once again to linear perspective thanks to the receding grid appearing in the close-up shot, but, as Rothkopf has already suggested (31-33), they also refer to the window metaphor traditionally associated with the picture plane and, with it, to the inherent transparency-opacity issue.⁷ Moreover, one should also note that the unique paradoxical nature of the photographic medium – as both an index and an icon to put it briefly (see Schaeffer) – may also have lead Bochner to conceptualize this tension. Indeed, the artist has explicitly shown himself aware of this specificity of photography when creating *36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams* (1966). This work is based on a series of structures made of small wooden blocks rearranged on a daily basis. When invited by Virginia Dwan to exhibit these structures at her *Scale Models and Drawings* show in January 1967,

Bochner realized that no single piece represented clearly the ongoing ordering process. So he decided to use photography in order to present simultaneously, as objectively as he could, various arrangements, and exhibited three photographic views (plan, elevation and corner perspective) of each of the twelve configurations. Yet, despite Bochner's careful efforts, the photographs could not depict the wooden arrangements without introducing differences of scale, distortions, or casting shadows. Far from being neutral and literal, these photographs were "illusion of literalism" as Bochner put it (Newman: 118), that is to say they were both light sensitive surfaces and representational scenes.⁸

But the '*mise en système*' of perspective transparency and flatness 'performed', as it were, by Bochner would fulfill at the time a particular theoretical and critical task. For one ought to note that in 1967, the visual disorder introduced by the flatness of the support in the traditional structure of organization of space on a flat surface could not fail to allude to the modernist theory of art.

• Perspective and Modernist Flatness

In an important interview with James Meyer, Mel Bochner asserted not only that the issues raised by his works in the 1960s, including his photographic pieces, were pictorial ones ("Without the history of the practice of painting as the background for all my work, it becomes a series of disparate gestures" [2001: 199]), but he also emphasized the critical nature of these works vis-à-vis the theories of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried (199-204). When asked by James Meyer if modernism had undermined perspective, Bochner answered:

But did it? Multiple viewpoints, simultaneity, transparency, flatness – all the tropes of modernism seemed to be the death knell for perspective. Yet look what's happened in the past fifteen years or so (...); the dominant form of contemporary spatial representation is one-point perspective. Instead of repressing perspective (...) I think it has to be reproblemized. (...) Modernist theory led us to believe that these issues were all resolved (204).

Indeed, if the linear perspective addressed by Bochner's photographic works immediately refers to the history of painting, the use of a strict grid could not fail to refer to the formalist modernist account of that history.

As Rosalind Krauss has convincingly argued in a now classical essay, the grid structure, numerous examples of which were visible in art by the time Bochner produced his photographs, has been emblematic of the whole modernist ambition – its regularity rejecting imitation and its lateral spread emphasizing the surface (50-64). Yet, for his part, Bochner diverts the

modernist grid in turning it into a perspectival lattice and subtly reopening it to representation and narrative. In so doing, he seems to undermine the radical break of abstract modernist painting with tradition. As a matter of fact, the artist had already made this point clear as early as November 1966 in his review of the exhibition "Systemic Painting", a review in which he alluded to themes shortly to be found in his own work.

Whatever else painting has been, it has been an art form which has endured a number of radical shifts of intent. What originated and existed for a long period as a means of representation has in rapid succession become a means aware of itself, involved with itself and finally a thing-in-itself (14).

Yet, Bochner further argued, formalist modernism, which he accused of being based on a "reductive fallacy", is nothing but a category.

[And] categories only exist for thought and not apart from it. Things themselves, such as paintings, are not categories and are not generated by them (14).

Hence, abstract paintings to which the formalist category applies must not be considered apart from the long history to which they belong. Furthermore, Bochner asserted explicitly that the painting's flat surface arrived at by modernism actually complies with the traditional perspectival convention of illusionist painting. With regard to Kenneth Noland's paintings, for instance, Bochner suggested that

picturing targets, bands or chevrons is a representational activity. Centralization of the motif or its placement parallel to the framing edge does not change the picture plane into anything other than *a conventional window-on-the-world conception of painting* (14, my emphasis).

As a matter of fact, as Bochner invites us to think, it seems reasonable to investigate the relationship between flatness and perspective, and along with this flatness the art theory that positively accounts for it. For not only is perspective tightly interrelated with the issue of flatness, but one also ought to pay attention to the way both linear perspective and modernist aesthetics constitute systems through which the space of painting is *ruled* and *ordered* with regard to the strict conditions of its visual apprehension.

According to the convention of monofocal linear perspective, the location of the vanishing point that rules the entire unfolding of the perspectival space and the arrangement of the

figures in the picture is determined by a perpendicular projection of the eye of the beholder onto the painting surface. The projective space of representation is therefore ordered *by* and conforms *to* an external gaze for which it unfolds. At a glance, a single eye gives access to the whole space and to the things that inhabit it.⁹ And this, precisely, is not unlike the modernist aesthetic model. Initially developed with regard to the pictorial medium and its apprehension, this model rests on the premise of an exclusively *optical* and *immediate* experience of the work of art.¹⁰ According to modernist theoreticians, an artist's ability to deal with the formal issues set or raised by the physical characteristics of a particular medium would lead this artist to create a perfectly autonomous work of art the formal plenitude of which had to be *grasped at a glance* by the viewer. In the case of painting, to comply with this aesthetic model, painters needed only emphasize visually the flatness of the picture plane – or, to put it in one word, to create a monochrome. As modernist theoreticians argued, immediate visual apprehension was the *condition* to which one had to submit in order to conceive and create a work of art – the whole medium specificity theory being mainly based on this very assumption. Thus, just as the viewer's eye marks the apex of the visual pyramid in the linear perspective system, so too the modernist tenets of opticality and immediacy inaugurate a modality of perception to which works of art had to conform. This modernist optical model was to determine the works it was applied to in their very formal structure.

If one is then willing to agree that Mel Bochner initiated at the time a close dialogue between perspective and modernist flatness, we may now be able to clarify his critical attitude vis-à-vis the latter thanks to the former.

• A New Apparatus

One of the main points of complaint or criticism expressed by the minimalist artists (to whom Bochner was closely associated in the mid-1960s) against modernist theory concerned the fact that one artistic medium, namely sculpture, was assessed according to the specific features of another one, namely painting.¹¹ The minimalists' response to this contradiction consisted in approaching the issue of the specificity of the art object anew, by considering its relation to the beholder on a phenomenological basis – the minimalists undermining in passing the autonomy of the artwork also postulated by modernism (see Judd; Morris, 1966a and 1966b). But if Bochner's metaphorical use of perspective for modernist theory does allude to such a phenomenological involvement of the beholder by assigning her or him a particular point of view in front of the work, the metaphor also matters insofar as perspective implies a certain theory of vision that the work it structures unveils or embodies. In our opinion, Mel Bochner made this point clear in his essay "The Serial Attitude", also published in 1967. He wrote:

Perspective, almost universally dismissed as a concern in recent art, is a fascinating example of the application of prefabricated systems. In the work of artists like Uccello, Dürer, Piero, Saendredam, Eakins (especially their drawings), it can be seen to exist entirely as methodology. *It demonstrates not how things appear but rather the workings of its own strict postulates* (45, my emphasis).

And immediately after this statement, Bochner devoted an entire paragraph to Girard Desargues, a French mathematician, engineer and architect of the 17th century said to be the founder of projective geometry.

Whereas Euclidian geometry frequently deals with parallel lines, that is to say lines that never meet or meet at a point at infinity, projective geometry considers them a special case. Under the direct influence of pictorial perspective or “accepting the visual evidence” as Bochner put it, projective geometry assumes parallels to be converging lines that must be drawn that way. Taking this axiom for granted, projective geometry investigates the invariant geometric properties of figures under projections along a beam of lines converging to a point that marks the observer’s viewpoint. This geometry reminds us that perspective succeeds in creating a perfect illusion insofar as it is based on a precisely adjusted and ordered construction, a construction the coherence of which strictly depends on the particular and unique position that it assigns to the beholder [Fig. 2].¹²

This is exactly what Bochner demonstrates in a strategy he developed in a couple of other photographic works that challenge the validity of perspective construction. *H-2* (1966-1967), an overhead shot of a wooden blocks structure from *36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams*, and *Convex Perspective* (1967) already mentioned, consist in enlarged photographs cut along the edges of the object depicted and mounted on masonite. These silhouettes are hung a few inches off the wall so that they cast actual shadows and gain physical presence. But like a *trompe l’œil*, the illusive depth of these photographs is only persuasive as long as the viewer stands in front of the work and looks at it directly, but it collapses as soon as the viewer stands at an angle and realizes that he is staring at a flat surface. The spatial coherence of these works rests on a single point of view.

Turning to the perspective metaphor carried out in the artist’s photographic works, one might assume that Bochner’s critical claim against perspective and the way it conceals actual conditions of vision also addressed the most recent artistic developments in the realm of painting, that is to say works of art with which Clement Greenberg’s artistic theory dealt. For, just as the perspectival space of a painting is only coherent from a single point of view, so too would the issues of flatness and medium specificity raised by modernist theory (and reappraised by minimalists and other artists during the mid 1960s) only have consistency and

Since Euclidean geometry could reasonably be regarded as disposing of problems created by the sense of touch, it remained to investigate the geometry of the sense of sight. Toward this end the work on perspective offered a second major suggestion. The basic idea in the system of focused perspective is that of projection and section. A projection is a set of lines of light from the eye to the points of an object

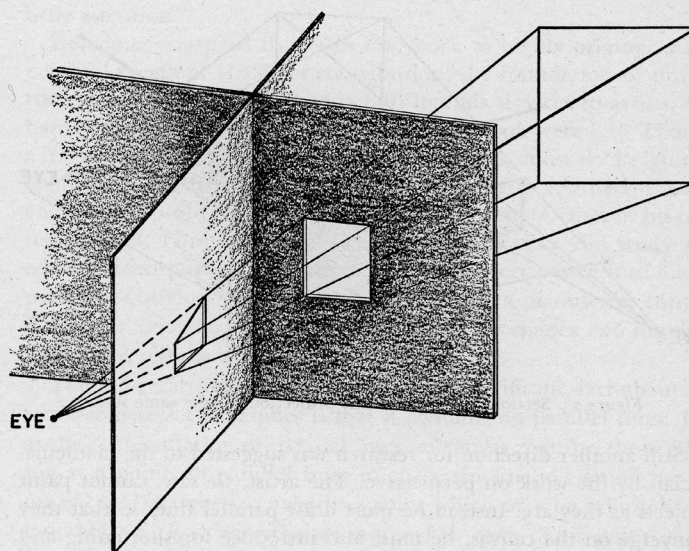


Figure 24. Two different sections of the same projection

or scene; a section is the pattern formed by the intersection of these lines with a glass sheet placed between the eye and the object viewed. Though the section on a glass sheet will vary in size and shape with the position and angle at which the sheet is held, each of these sections (fig. 24) creates the same impression on the eye as does the object itself.

This fact suggests several large mathematical questions. Suppose we consider two different sections of the same projection. Since they create the same impression on the eye they should have many geometrical properties in common. Just what properties do the sections

validity from the standpoint of the theory of vision or aesthetic model they themselves rest on. In other words, these artistic issues are only conceivable in relation to or, to put it differently, are only visible in the light shed by the particular modernist theoretical conditions. As Mel Bochner wrote some time between 1967 and 1970,

A fundamental assumption in much recent past art was that things have stable properties, i.e., boundaries. This seemingly simple premise became the basis for a spiraling series of conclusions. Boundaries, however, are only the fabrication of our desire to detect them... a tradeoff between seeing something and wanting to enclose it (1970: 72).

In this sense, the critical use made of linear perspective by the artist is not unlike the one made by Erwin Panofsky or by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to name an author probably more familiar to the artist. Stressing the way perspective brings the subjective point of view in intrinsic connection with the object perceived, Panofsky understood linear perspective as a schema coherent with the mode of knowledge that characterized the culture and epoch in which it arose and through which artistic reality was to be apprehended (Panofsky), while Merleau-Ponty understood it as a cultural apparatus that imperceptibly “informs” perception.¹³ As Bochner himself said,

Perspective, as a system, is a dysfunctional map, but one that over the last five hundred years has entered the collective unconscious. We accept that it represents what we see (Bochner, 2001: 204).

Yet, for Bochner, this ‘map’ is neither universal, nor “symbolic” as in Panofsky’s account of it,¹⁴ nor is it a formal apparatus one could shed off as Merleau-Ponty would argue. What is at stake here for Bochner is to denounce the apparatus specific to a particular historical artistic context, namely the 1960s. Indeed, if formalist modernism is understood as the theoretical apparatus that only makes conceivable or possible the issues it raises, any variation or alteration of this theoretical apparatus simultaneously implies changes or modifications of these issues. Thus, Bochner seems to suggest, to free artistic creation from the yoke under which modernism maintained it would not consist in questioning the work of art and its medium on a phenomenological basis – like the minimalists trying to discover the silent truth of the medium or like the ‘anti form’ tendency trying to return to a form of raw or ‘wild’ vision (see for instance Morris, 1969), but it would rather consist in subjecting artistic creation to an *epistemological* examination in the Foucauldian sense of the word. That is to say, to pay attention to the *conditions of visibility* determined by modernism (or any art theory for that

matter) that visually govern and coerce artistic creation. Indeed, according to Michel Foucault, for each age, for each historical formation, there is a pre-determination of the visible and the articulable, of seeing and saying things, which goes beyond any particular behavior, mentality or ideas, since it makes them all possible. It is the combinations of these preset statements and visibilities that define an underlying system of knowledge or 'historical *a priori*' specific to each epoch.¹⁵ So, by analogy, one can argue that Bochner challenged modernist issues in a similar way, suggesting that a viewer can see or an artist can make seeable only under the conditions laid down for visibility by a particular system of artistic knowledge or truth (that merges into a dominant and coercive artistic theory a body of artistic practices and aesthetical statements).

It seems to me that our perception of things is determined by the ideas that we have about them. It's a case of a certain mental space that one has for both seeing and thinking. We like to feel that they are separate, but they are not – they overlap. They overlap in our conception of things, and consequently, our experience of them (Bochner, 1969: 57).¹⁶

In this regard, it comes as no surprise that Bochner explicitly referred to *The Order of Things* by Foucault as early as 1971 in order to define modernism and postmodernism as two epistemic paradigms.¹⁷ And if Mel Bochner's art itself entails post-modernist features at all, it is precisely in the way in which his attempt to unveil or denounce the modernist conditions of visibility already contributes to the shift to a new apparatus.¹⁸

If the disturbed linear perspective of Bochner's 1967 photographs can be said to work as a 'metapicture' in W. J. T. Mitchell's sense, it might as well be referred to as a 'hypericon', that is to say a metapicture which encapsulates a whole system of knowledge (Mitchell, 1986: 5-6; Mitchell, 1994: 49). For not only do the visual tensions or ambiguities at play in Bochner's perspective photographs call into question how a picture works from a phenomenological point of view, as in the 'dialectical image' class of metapictures (the instability between depth and flatness questions back the viewer's gaze, asking about its mechanisms and the sense of vision), but they also epitomize, from an epistemological point of view, the underlying conditions of visibility on which the contemporaneous dominant art theory rests – the close intertwining of transparency and opacity in the photographs referring explicitly to the formalist account of modernism that insists on the materiality and opacity of the picture plane rather than on its transparency as a window.

To conclude, at a time when the supremacy of modernist aesthetics was severely questioned and when the issue of perception arose insistently, Bochner, thanks to the motif of linear perspective, raised the issue of the gap or the play between the object one experiences and the mental framework – here the artistic theory – that necessarily supports this sensitive act.

This use was therefore to anticipate or to confirm an important issue the artist was never to abandon. Indeed, during the following years, Bochner never ceased to question the gap or even the contradictions between the various preconceived systems of the world's representation (linguistic, numerical and so on) and the experience of the world itself:

In my work the subject matter is the contradiction between physical space and mental space. How do our concepts of the world differ from the world itself? (Bochner, 1971: 92).

• Notes

- 1 For an excellent discussion of this series see Rothkopf: 24-28.
- 2 For instance, Robert Morris's 1966 famous account of minimalism in "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1 and 2" (1966a, 1966b) was much indebted to Gestalt theory. Gestalt theory was notably made popular at the time by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion of it in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) as well as by Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception. A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (1954) and *Toward a Psychology of Art* (1966).
- 3 Sketches of multistable images such as the so-called 'Necker cube' (seen alternatively as a hexagon, a protruding or receding cube) are to be found in *The Singer Notes*, a notebook compiling Bochner's notes and drawings when he participated in the E.A.T. artist-in-residence program at the Singer Central Laboratories in 1968. Space does not permit here to discuss at length Gestalt theory. However let us note that Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose writings Bochner knew very well, famously criticized the phenomenological approach to such images in his *Philosophical Investigations* (193-215).
- 4 On the notion of 'double negation' we are indebted to the discussion of Piero della Francesca's perspective by the French art historian Daniel Arasse, who himself drew on Thomas Martone's analysis of the Italian painter (286).
- 5 As Louis Marin writes, "The invisibility of the support surface is the condition of possibility for the visibility of the world represented. Diaphanousness is the theoretical-technical definition of the plastic screen of representation. The perspective (...) is indeed the formal structure of representation, but it is such only through a (de)negation of its reflecting-reflexive mechanism: the picture. Representation as mimesis is accomplished only through that (de)negation. It constitutes itself only by denying the theoretical subject that produces it. But, conversely, the theoretical subject is constituted only through it and at the price of its own (de)negation" (312).
- 6 These works are close to another polaroid work entitled *Viscosity (Mineral Oil)* (1968), which consists in a single overhead view of a grid made of mineral oil.
- 7 It is worth noting that in 1968, Bochner created a series of twelve photographs explicitly entitled *Transparent and Opaque* based on the same principle (see Rothkopf: 31-33). Let us also suggest that the liquid nature of water as well as the horizontality of the 'picture plane' at stake here might have referred, for Bochner, to abstract expressionist painting and especially to Jackson Pollock (and Hans Namuth's famous 1950 photographs of the painter). Spring 1967, the Museum of Modern Art had just devoted an important retrospective to Pollock, a show Bochner reviewed

for the May issue of *Arts Magazine*. In so doing, Bochner would have already closely, if subtly, associated high modernist painting with perspectival structure. See below for a further discussion of this matter.

- 8 The semiotic ambiguity of the photographic medium is precisely at stake in Bochner's 1968 *Singer Lab Measurement* series as well as in *Actual Size (Face)* and *Actual Size (Hand)*, two photographic works printed so that the parts of Bochner's body depicted appear at their actual size. This work was actually meant as a response to his own *Singer Lab Measurement* series (1968), a series of photographs recording the marking off distance between real objects in small Letraset numbers. Realizing that these measurements were meaningless since it was impossible to determine the actual size of the objects depicted when looking at the pictures, Bochner had his head and forearm shots printed at actual size. Yet, according to Bochner, far from being a perfect indexical representation of reality, the photographs resulted paradoxically in the loss of the real referent since they became "the index of the index, or a vicious circle" (in Obrist and Suarez), that is to say they were the photographic index of another index, namely scale. See on this matter Skrebowski: 924-925.
- 9 For a critical account of this traditional understanding of linear perspective see Damisch, 1994 (Part I).
- 10 Let us single out here a couple of Greenberg's famous statements to which Bochner may have paid particular attention. "The human body is no longer postulated as the agent of space in either pictorial or sculptural art; now it is eyesight alone (...)" (1961: 143). In addition, Greenberg wrote that the modernist work must be "grasped only in an indivisible instant of time" like a "sudden revelation" (1959: 80-81).
- 11 "It is significant, moreover, that modernist sensibility, though it rejects sculptural painting of any kind, allows sculpture to be as pictorial as it pleases. Here prohibition against one art's entering the domain of another is suspended, thanks to the unique concreteness and literalness of sculpture's medium. Sculpture can confine itself to virtually two dimensions (...) without being felt to violate the limitations of its medium (...)" (Greenberg, 1961: 143).
- 12 Bochner was notably introduced to projective geometry through the reading of Morris Kline's *Mathematics in Western Culture* (144-158). On this issue see also Damisch, 1994: 150-151.
- 13 In her essay "Perverse Perspectives" Lucy R. Lippard quoted Merleau-Ponty: "There is no vision without thought. But it is not enough to think in order to see. Vision is a conditioned thought (...). The thinking that belongs to vision functions according to a program and a law which it has not given itself. It does not possess its own premises; it is not a thought altogether present and actual; there is in its center a mystery of passivity" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 175; Lippard: 28). On Merleau-Ponty's desire to return from Renaissance perspective fashioned by culture to a 'brute' or 'wild' vision, see also *The Visible and the Invisible* (212-213). Let us recall that Bochner first learned about Merleau-Ponty when he spent a few months studying existential philosophy at Northwestern University in 1963 (Bochner, 2007: 133).

- 14 Panofsky's understanding of perspective as "symbolic form" is obviously in opposition to the notion defined by Ernst Cassirer as universal (since, in the history of art, many different perspectival systems have actually been invented at various times and places). Yet Hubert Damisch, while highlighting this patent contradiction, considered the philosophical implications of Panofsky's assumption with full seriousness in his seminal study. Indeed, as Damisch demonstrates, perspective does convey a "symbolic" value in that the formal apparatus set by the perspective paradigm is equivalent to that of the sentence for the subject – for "it assigns the subject a place within a previously established network that gives it meaning while at the same time opening up the possibility of something like a statement in painting" (446).
- 15 On this issue of visibility understood in the particular terms of Michel Foucault's archeology, see Deleuze.
- 16 "I feel that the basic question in my work (...) is how do you experience yourself in the world, which is to say, how do you inhabit an *idea* of the world?" (Bochner, 1969: 58, original emphasis). Let us also recall that for many writers dealing with issues connected to the psychology of perception during the 1960s, vision, far from being innocent or neutral, was understood as culturally informed. One of the most famous examples is probably that of Ernst H. Gombrich who argued, in *Art and Illusion* (1960), that the creation and the interpretation of artistic images are limited by the conventions that characterize the epoch in which they arise. One also ought to recall the importance of Ludwig Wittgenstein in this regard. Wittgenstein criticized the presumed ability of phenomenology to reach an object 'in itself' by way of pure description. According to Wittgenstein, not only is it impossible to adopt a position external both to the world and to language from the standpoint of which one would be able to evaluate the fidelity or adequacy of the latter to the former, but the only language available for description is the ordinary language that conditions this description by the rules and laws it follows. The experience of vision cannot give access to the thing in itself since it is governed by the language with which we recount it. The vision of the world is thus held captive by language games which determine the meaning of the words with which one describes it. As Wittgenstein famously wrote: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world" (in Bochner, 1967: 44).
- 17 "Michel Foucault, in *Words and Things*, says that each age has only one epistemology, only one way to verify its own conception of knowledge. The question, for him, is not the classical philosophical question of ontology, 'How am I in the world?', but rather the often dismissed one of epistemology, 'How is the world in me?'. Foucault says that we are presently passing out of one epistemological era which he calls 'modernity' (...). For lack of a better term, I would refer to this new period as 'post-modernism'" (Bochner, 1971: 91). Let us highlight the fact that Bochner refers to Foucault's book by a literal translation of its original French title, *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), rather than by its official English title, *The Order of Things* (first published in 1970 by Pantheon Books). This might suggest that Bochner knew about this book before its English version was released.

- 18 In line with Foucault's own argument, it ought to be noted however that if one is to trace an ongoing epistemic shift, this shift and the analysis of its causes would have intelligibility only insofar as they fit with the reigning epistemic rules of the actual period in which the tracing and analysis take place.

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