

Learning from Lascaux

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*'Architecture is worn in both senses of the word.'*¹

In 1940 something strange happened in the history of painting. This event did not take place where one might expect, say on the floor of some abandoned warehouse or any other space where a modern artist might set up shop. It occurred in a rather out of the way place near Lascaux, France, where, as the story goes, a group of young boys stumbled into a cavern in pursuit of their dog. What they found there was a staggering discovery of epic proportions. Covering the surface of the walls of this network of grottos were perhaps the most important extant examples of European Paleolithic cave paintings that have ever been identified. Visitors flocked by the thousands to see these 17,000 year old petroglyphs as the cave paintings of Lascaux became a major cultural spectacle. Then the trouble began. It seems as though sometimes too much love can indeed be a bad thing. As more and more people came to look at these primal origins of painting the carbon dioxide and heat emitted from their bodies began to affect the works in a corrosive manner causing them to slowly disappear from the surface of the walls. It was as if the spectator had become a malignant virus in the interface between architecture and painting. In 1963 the caves were closed to the public in order to preserve the paintings for future generations of scholars. In 1983, in a move that would seem to be far more American than French, a replica of these paintings known as Lascaux II was opened a few hundred feet away. The result of nearly eleven years of painstaking work by a team of twenty artists using the same methods and materials as the original painters, Lascaux II would become a major tourist destination that would rival the best of American roadside attractions.

While this was transpiring in France, back

in America in the fall of 1968, some five years after the authorities closed the Lascaux caves to the public, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour took their Yale architecture students to Las Vegas. The goal of their trip had nothing to do with gambling or taking in a show featuring Elvis or the Rat Pack. They were there to do field work for their seminar 'Learning From Las Vegas, or Form Analysis as Design Research.' Their resulting book *Learning from Las Vegas* was something of a milestone in the history of modern architecture. In this work the authors unapologetically and non-judgmentally set out to analyze the commonplace existing architectural forms found in the built environment of the American commercial roadside (in this case the Las Vegas strip) that had been so often neglected or derided by modernist architects and critics. And what exactly were the lessons that they gleaned from their study of Las Vegas? As the authors suggested it was not so much a question of what they found there but of their way of seeing this environment. As they put it in their introduction, 'Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things.'² This method of questioning how we look at the built environment was a direct challenge to the orthodoxy of modernist architectural purity as expressed in the mantra 'form follows function'. On the Las Vegas strip they found that quite the opposite was true. Functionality in architectural form was supplanted by the idiosyncratic, the superfluous, and the fantastic. Follies abounded. Architecture was no longer tied to the

rigorous tenets of a modernist program with its insistence on pure formal essence but could instead be acknowledged for its uniquely aberrant distinctive qualities.

But what do these two moments in the history of visual culture have to do with one another? In the same way that Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour were able to draw lessons from the vernacular architectural forms of Las Vegas, what might we be able to learn from Lascaux? And more importantly, what lessons could Las Vegas and Lascaux together hold for the contemporary history of painting? It is here at this intersection between architecture and painting that we can locate the work of the painter Richard Wright, an artist who has learned lessons surprisingly both from Lascaux and from Las Vegas.

Having begun his career as a painter who worked on canvas, he went through a period of seeming to reject this medium and the art world itself by simply stopping to make work for a period of approximately two years. His response might be seen as more akin to that of John Baldessari who in his 1970 *Cremation Project* decided to burn all of his existing canvases produced between 1953 and 1966 in a kind of conceptual farewell to the practice of painting as he knew it (significantly, he continued to 'paint' by other means), rather than Daniel Buren's programmatic and public 'refusal' of painting in the 1967 Salon de la Jeune Peinture in Paris.³ During his down-time Wright consciously destroyed all of his canvases that had been completed up until 1990. His choice to discard these works can be seen less as an outright rejection of the medium of painting and more a reaction along the lines of Douglas Huebler's insistence in 1969 that 'the world is full of objects, more or less interesting;

I do not wish to add any more.'⁴ This 'pause' in Wright's artistic development allowed for a significant rebooting of his aesthetic software, for when he returned to the practice of making work he no longer made objects. Reinserting himself into the art scene in the mid-1990s, Wright developed a unique painterly practice that had moved from the canvas to the wall giving the works that he produced a built-in expiration date before they were painted over. This move allowed the artist to get away from the production of painting as a consumable object, replacing it with a phenomenological model in which the work interacted with both architecture and the body of the spectator within a prescribed period of time.

Seen from afar, it is often impossible to tell exactly how Wright's images are made. The at times incomprehensibly intricate qualities of their design elements might seem to suggest that they are composed on a computer and then transferred to the wall with either a silk-screening technique or with vinyl cut-outs. As one approaches these works more closely, it becomes clear that this is shockingly not the case. Each work is painstakingly applied to the wall in gouache by the artist himself. This process is incredibly obsessive, labor intensive and time consuming, and requires that the artist be able to slow his body down in a nearly Zen-like manner in order to execute with repetitive precision the painted lines, iconic forms, and typographic flourishes that make up the composition of his images. It is this dissonance between the extremely hard-edged, graphic quality of these works and their genesis in the realm of the hand-made that gives them their visual impact.

While I mentioned earlier that the arc of Wright's career has in some ways mimicked

the trajectory of conceptualism's dematerialization of the object of art in the late 1960s, there is in fact a striking difference between his work and theirs. One might justly compare Wright to an artist who has become identified with that moment such as Sol LeWitt who famously set the terms of debate for conceptual art in his 1968 essay for *Artforum* 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art.' While Wright shares many of the concerns of someone like LeWitt, what is crucially different about his work is that it is always produced by the artist himself. The whole point of LeWitt's wall drawings is that they exist as a set of mathematical instructions that can be executed without the presence of the artist and therefore embody the essence of a conceptual practice in which 'the idea becomes a machine that makes the art' as he himself suggested. This is definitively not the case with Wright's works. Each of his wall paintings is rendered by hand by the artist himself. As such, each work is unique and site specific, or rather, is subjectively responsive to the individual character of the space that it is to inhabit. While there is no denying that LeWitt's works can also be adjusted to fit the space in which they are to be executed, there is something more personal, uncanny, and more phenomenological to Wright's work. Wright's body itself becomes a kind of transmitter of a visual message onto the wall of a building which in turn serves as a projection surface to be confronted by the viewer. The phenomenological quality of the work is two-fold in that the artist himself has contorted his body to force the material to become the image and then the viewers are confronted with a subtle visual transformation of the spatial environment in which they find themselves.

Wright's subject matter, if it can even be

called that, is derived from a variety of sources. His kaleidoscopically converging lines, repetitive geometric progressions, and baroque decorative fragments collide with a variety of extrapolations of typographic fonts and patterns seemingly derived from the world of underground tattoo design to form a kind of hybrid, graphic Esperanto. These stylistic building blocks are transferred in colored gouache directly onto the walls of the buildings in which he exhibits his paintings. Although his works have been compared by some critics to medieval manuscripts in recognition of the unique quality of each subsequent iteration of his designs, we might benefit from another comparison to the world of pre-Gutenberg publications. In a sense, Wright's graphic compositions take on the quality of the marginalia that found its way into the tradition of the medieval illuminated manuscript with their at times satirical and absurd visual commentary on the text being transcribed. Significantly, medieval marginalia operated outside of the functional logic of the typographic blocks that constituted the architectonic structure of the text, offering a subjective reading of the official discourse being conducted in the center of the page. It is a similar active targeting of the structural margins of architectural space that forms one of the key organizing principles of Wright's work as he consciously places his paintings in the forgotten, idiosyncratic, or neglected parts of a building.

While Harold Rosenblum once asserted that Jackson Pollock and the abstract expressionists conceived of the canvas as an 'arena in which to act,' Richard Wright has moved back further in time to absorb the lessons of Lascaux. His arena is that of architecture. In speaking about the relation of his work to

the buildings that they inhabit, Wright has described architecture as 'a geography of response.' As he has suggested, '*it is an intimate and imperfect surface which has more to do with pathways, edges, nodes, volumes than it has to do with the vista of the façade, the plan, the section, the elevation, etc.*'⁵ If indeed architecture is, for Wright, a kind of geographic realm of exploration, then he has chosen to go off the map into the *terra incognita* of the built environment. Wright often, although not always, refrains from the easy money shots that might be offered by installing his works on major gallery walls with full frontal site lines. His works are instead often carefully placed in out of the way corners, hallways, and other architectural spaces that are often the lost stepchildren of building designs. This decision is a conscious one in which he chooses to both call attention to the devalued character of these spaces while also attempting to disrupt the architectural language by breaking up our habitually inattentive flow through these spaces. Turning the corner in a stairwell we might be surprised to find ourselves confronted with one of Wright's colorful graphic stigmata installed at the top of a wall where it terminates into the ceiling. Moving through a gallery space we might see a set of gilded sans serif letters ensconced in the wells of a series of skylights. The problem that we are confronted with is that most of us don't actually see architecture. Part of the beauty of Wright's wall paintings is that they not only force us to look at their own factuality but they also make us see the space in which they are located with a new vision.

Wright's work often begins with a subjective response on his part to an architectural anomaly or fault. While his practice sets out to disrupt subtly the architectural discourse

of a building, he himself has suggested that all architecture is always and already disrupted from within. As he suggests: '*This deviation can just be about use, the perfect is tainted by interaction with the grubby personalities of its occupants or perhaps the building itself is more deliberately adapted (perhaps many times) for new or real use. These deflections become the residue of events and I find this staining ... can often be the beginning of a work. The work in other words often starts from some kind of fault.*'⁶

It is in this way that we can understand Wright's comment that 'architecture is worn in both senses of the word.' Bodies move through buildings. People live in spaces in ways that architects never dreamed. In 1965, the Italian Arte Povera artist Michelangelo Pistoletto noted the smudges left on the walls and floor boards of a gallery where people had been leaning while they were talking. His response was the construction of a sculpture entitled *Structure for talking while standing* (1965–1966) which acted as a kind of free standing bar for people to lean on during an opening. Modern architects of course are often less forgiving and are often accused of hating the idea of anyone actually living in their buildings. Frank Lloyd Wright infamously kept the keys to some of the private homes that he built so that he could show up unannounced while the owners were out and rearrange the furniture that he had designed. If we can call a cave a kind of architecture, and I think that we can, then the carbon dioxide emitted by the visitors to Lascaux could itself be seen as a kind of wear and tear, a staining of the architecture brought on by the use of its occupants.

Richard Wright's practice did not, of course, emerge in a vacuum and can be contextualized in terms of a number of

historical precedents of which the artist himself has mentioned the painter Piet Mondrian. In his 1923 essay 'Is Painting Inferior to Architecture?', Mondrian commented on the relationship between architecture and painting when he suggested that:

The new aesthetic for architecture is that of the new painting. Architecture that is now purifying itself is prepared to achieve the same consequences that painting realized in Neoplasticism after the purifying process of Futurism and Cubism. Through the unity of the new aesthetic, architecture and painting can together form one art and can dissolve into each other.⁷

Like many modernist proclamations, Mondrian's vision of a pure merging of painting and architecture was never fully realized. One of the most successful attempts to do so can be found in the architect Gerrit Rietveld's Schroeder House in Utrecht which was built in 1924 as attempt to embody the ideals of the De Stijl artists. Like many modernist buildings before and after, it has not aged well, as the purity of its utopian design has been disrupted by the bodies living in it as well as by poor construction practices. Richard Wright's work has wisely stayed away from these kinds of attempts at a grand reconciliation of painting and architecture. Following the likes of the painter Sigmar Polke, who has celebrated the aleatory character of the printing error as a new beginning for many of his works, Wright is much more interested in the failure of modernist architectural dreams for it is precisely in these moments of rupture with the Platonic ideals of functional purity that he finds his own space to insert his work. It is his fascination with these gaps that has led him to suggest that

his work is 'like a worn step, it is like a smoke detector, it is even like a picture, but it is more like the space between the letters of words.'⁸

Strangely enough, it is perhaps the work of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica that in my mind illuminates the work of Richard Wright the most, for at its heart is a question regarding our phenomenological experience of both painting and architecture. Like all of his neo-concretist Brazilian cohorts of the late 1950s and 1960s, Oiticica was an inheritor of the tradition of Mondrian, Malevich, and the Constructivists. In his 'spatial reliefs,' 'nuclei,' and 'penetrables,' which he began producing in the early 1960s, Oiticica expanded both the definition and the physical manifestation of painting by exploring the notion of painting in space and radically altering the viewer's relationship to both the object of painting and the plane of representation. The artist's experiments led him to embark on a slow evolution of the notion of the painting's support surface by removing it from the wall, contorting it and merging it with color in a radical hybridization of painting and sculpture that he termed a 'non-object' which was in his mind neither a painting nor a sculpture. With Oiticica's work, one did not simply look at a painting but rather moved around it or even walked through it as the works began to take on an architectonic form. In his formulation, rather than refusing to paint, the artist brought together color, structure, space, and the dimension of time in a radical redefinition of painting that had at its center the phenomenological experience of the spectator. It is this experiential quality of Oiticica's work that in a much quieter manner lies at the centre of Richard Wright's work.

In 2001 I invited Richard Wright to

undertake a site-specific project at the Walker Art Center as his contribution to the exhibition *Painting at the Edge of the World*. He spent a number of days choosing the preferred site for his piece which he decided to locate in a dead-end corner of an extremely nonfunctional, triangular wedge of gallery space abutting a floor to ceiling window. This is a space that we as curators have a horrible time trying to install, as it seems to exist completely outside of the rational framework of the otherwise minimalist grid of our Edward Larabie Barnes building. The artist spent the better part of two weeks laboriously applying his gouache to the walls, rendering a series of lines that radiated out from four circles like graphic representations of sunbeams being refracted as if by a glass of water. The work was installed towards the point where the wall meets the ceiling and the window and even extends up onto a portion of the ceiling. When the work was completed it turned out that the color modulation of the gouache chosen by the artist allowed the work to visually respire with the changing light conditions. The work was alive and made the building itself come to life in a way. With all of Richard Wright's work however, all that is solid melts into air. After twelve weeks of life the exhibition ended and the work's life support was unplugged. I wonder if buildings are capable of memory?

As the Walker Art Center has recently opened its new addition designed by the Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron, I cannot help but think about Richard Wright's work that still resides in the gallery under what must now be several layers of white paint. The work is perhaps only a faint memory for most of those who saw it. Perhaps some day we will invent a new kind of

archaeology to account for the ephemeral and transitory quality of works such as these that are seemingly consigned to the register of memory and forgetfulness. Somehow I cannot help but think that the work is still radiating its presence as a ghost in the architectural machine of our building. It is here at the intersection between the forgotten, marginal spaces of architecture and our own bodies that we begin to see the lessons to be gleaned from both Las Vegas and Lascaux. This is the story of a painting practice that has actively sought out the impermanent, the contingent, the transitory, and the neglected and that embraces openness, fragility, and the possibility of failure. It is a practice that above all else takes its point of origin from our own unseen relationship to our built environment, asking us to move through these spaces and works and see the familiar in an unfamiliar way.

1. Adam Szymczyk, 'Conversation with Richard Wright', in Rita Kersting, *Richard Wright* (Düsseldorf: Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 2002), p. 57.

2. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1977), p. 3.

3. Buren and his colleagues Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni removed their works from the galleries of the 1967 Salon de la Jeune Peinture leaving a sign in its place that read: 'Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni are not exhibiting' along with a text in the form of a flyer that explained why they refused to exhibit. The text read as follows:

'Because painting is a game, / Because painting is the application (consciously or otherwise) of the rules of composition, / Because painting is the freezing of movement, / Because painting is the representation (or interpretation or appropriation or disputation or presentation) of objects, / Because painting is a springboard for the imagination, / Because painting is spiritual illustration, / Because painting is justification, / Because painting serves an end, / Because to paint is to give aesthetic value to flowers, women, eroticism, the daily environment, art, dadaism, psychoanalysis and the war in Vietnam, / *We are not painters.*'

4. Douglas Huebler quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 74.

5. Adam Szymczyk, 'Conversation with Richard Wright', in Rita Kersting, *Richard Wright* (Düsseldorf: Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 2002), p. 57.

6. *ibid.*, p. 57.

7. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, trans. and eds., *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1986), p. 174. Quoted in Andrew Blauvelt, 'No Visible Means of Support', in Douglas Fogle, ed., *Painting at the Edge of the World* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2001), pp. 117–133. See this essay for a further discussion of the question of architecture and painting.

8. Adam Szymczyk, 'Conversation with Richard Wright', in Rita Kersting, *Richard Wright* (Düsseldorf: Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 2002), p. 57.

overleaf

NO TITLE, 2005

enamel and spray paint on mg paper · 110 × 165 cm
Courtesy The Modern Institute, Glasgow

following pages

INSTALLATION VIEW, THE MODERN INSTITUTE,
GLASGOW, 2003
gouache on wall