Harper Stone   <u>**Spacial Contradictions and Other Means to Revolution**</u>
11/14/06   "Surface is illusion, but so is depth" --David Hockney

I am interested in the juxtaposition of very deep space and very flat space as seen in the paintings of David Hockney and Matthias Weischer. I wish to examine how these paintings work formally, as well as the content that arises from the use of pictorial and picture-plane systems of spacial organization.

If we take as given that we can know nothing out of context -- that is, everything defines and is defined by what it is not -- then we can only know depth and flatness in relation to each other (depth and flatness being relative, rather than absolute properties). They define each other. Though they are necessary for each other, in their pure form they are mutually exclusive (one cannot perceive something as *very* deep and *very* flat simultaneously).

In the history of painting, a great many artists have favored one above the other, pursuing the illusion of great depth or total flatness; a great many others have pursued a mixture of the two, achieving a shallow space or an unwitting compromise wherein some of the formal properties suggest depth and others deter it. Such is the realm of the photograph, which suggests our visual experience as defined by light but negates it through mechanical averaging and a single viewpoint. However in neither case (purity or mixture) is the notion of space really addressed. In the case of purity, there is no contrasting opposite from which to build awareness. In the case of a mixture, neither is distinct enough to isolate, and so once again the necessary contrast is lacking. Space still plays an important role in these pictures, which can of course be discussed, but that dialogue must be brought from an external reference point.

In the case of some of Hockney's and Weischer's paintings, that awareness and dialogue emerges from within the work; the issue of space is self-defined, self-contained and explicit. In Hockney's *Sunbather* (1966), a figure lays on a towel beside a swimming pool. The figure and the towel define a plane to support them, and so we the upper third of the image as receding. The blue tiling running horizontally across the canvas can be read both as a pictorial element parallel to the viewer or as a decorative element

on the surface of the canvas. It provides a transition to the lower two-thirds of the image which are given over to a stylized depiction of water; a lattice of curving lines which seem to rest almost on top of the canvas, and thus reinforce the flatness of the picture plane. In the case of *Sunbather*, the kinds of space are discreet, only running together in the band of blue tiling. They are separate and are perceived separately.

In Hockney's *A Lawn Being Sprinkled* (1967), however, depth and flatness come together in nearly all areas of the painting. The top third depicts a house and fence, described by strait lines (mostly vertical and horizontal) in shades of gray, set against a blue sky. The lower two-thirds depicts a green lawn populated by v-shaped sprinklers. The size of the sprinklers and blades of grass decreases as they move up the image, giving the suggestion of spacial recession. But the lawn is made up of registers of parallel green marks such that if any one section were taken out of context it would read like the gridded works of Agnes Martin or Sol Lewitt. Few things can do more to reinforce the flatness of a surface than the imposition of a grid upon it, as each line of the grid echoes the frames of the support, and no shapes overlap one another. The visual tension in this work derives from:

> "The rectilinear grid…[which] establishes a strong consciousness of the surface on which the image rests, while at the same time suggesting real space through the identification of this grid with a three-dimensional setting… [and] reminding the viewer that the only space contained by a painting is the distance across its surface." (Livingstone 99).

In his *Paper Pool* series of 1978, Hockney presents us with a composite image of a pool that is crafted across six to twelve sheets of paper. By allowing thin bands of white space at the edges of these sheets, he provides a grid which serves not only to call attention to the flatness of the surface of the painting, but also to the discreteness the painting's parts and the materiality of its support (the pieces of paper). At the same time, it depicts a pool constructed under strict one-point perspective. Just enough information is given to construct the illusion of space, and just enough information is left out to deconstruct it:

> "Like Matisse's late paper cut-outs, to which the *Paper Pools* have been

compared, these pictures are at once fully representational and virtually abstract in the simplicity and daring of their formal designs.…One sheet on its own might read as an abstract image, one that recalls work in the same medium by artists such as Kelly, Noland and Frank Stella, but the relationship of the various parts provides a figurative context which modifies the interpretation of the marks," (Livingstone 211)

These paintings walk a paper-thin line (pun intended) between representation and abstraction, and their eloquence is found in this tension, as any element added or left out could make them give allegiance to (and thus be subject to the demands of) *either* a flat or deep reading. By suggesting both readings, they create the demands of their own viewing.

In *Model with Unfinished Self-Portrait* (1977), a carefully rendered naturalistic depiction of an interior with a man sleeping is contrasted with a diagrammatic background (actually another of Hockney's paintings, *Self-Portrait with Blue Guitar* 1977) that depicts Hockney as the artist working at a table. We perceive the space in the foreground as rounded because it is defined by the play of light on three-dimensional surfaces. The space in the background is at times flat (the blank canvas with outlined forms) and at times angled (defined by planes that do not reinforce the picture plane but do not recede perspectivally). The tension here is between perceptual space (as defined by light that we *see* reflecting off of forms) and theoretical space (as defined by lines and planes that we *know* represent objects in space). It is a contrast between symbolic and perceptual systems of representation, which raises our awareness not only of space, but also of the visual language of representation.

If we look at Weischer's interiors, the issue of space is brought even more to the foreground (no pun intended). In *St. Ludgerus* (2004), we see a room which is at first glance very naturalistic. But almost immediately we begin to notice things going fantastically awry. The top of the couch cushions is absent, and in its place we see a lower layer of painting with an anomalous brown form and drips (a telltale indicator of flatness). In other areas a form will just be outlined or blocked in white, revealing the grid at the foundation of the painting. In still other areas thick gestural paint is placed in

the context of representational space by a few key cast shadows and tonal similarity to the object which it stands in for.

In Weischer's *Würfel* (2003) our gaze moves back and forth between a color grid in the left third of the image and a billiards room in the right two-thirds. They are brought together by a subtle shadow being cast into the room from the grid, such that we are compelled to view them as part of the same space despite our opposite ways of reading them. In a way they draw each into the other's arena, causing us to view the color grid as a representation of an object (a grid in a picture rather than on a canvas) and to view the room as an assortment of colored paint on a surface. As Susanne Pfeffer declares:

> [Weischer's] painting makes a topic of its own prerequisites, asserts itself in its purest form as a painted plane. In the midst of the rigid figurativeness of his interiors, pure painterly gestures compel the gaze to the surface, making an abstract painting of the depiction. … The simultaneity of figurativeness and abstraction, of rigid figurativeness and impulsive painterly gesture, imbue Weischer's works with a great inner tension. (Cantz 16)

That tension derives from our inability to reduce what we are seeing to a single system, and so the painting resists the resolution that we as viewers have come to expect.

In *Gang* (2003), one of the simplest and most direct of Weischer's paintings, the issue of space reaches a new level. When one sees the image from a distance, one sees a room (defined by a floor and two walls), vacant but for a picture pinned to a wall. A few diagonal lines and areas of cast shadow are all that is necessary to create the sensation of three-dimensional space. But at 95 x 118 inches, it is very difficult to stand with enough distance to see the image as a room, and one is dominated by the thick paint surface, complete with drips or splatters. Moreover, it is split between two canvases and there is a good deal of paint which coms off the canvas, extending beyond the edge. This makes us aware of the painting as an object existing in the space of our world in addition to being a self-contained world of objects and spaces.

All systems have content that can be derived from their structure. That is, upon examination of any system, one finds reasons for the rules of the system's organization.

When a system is coherent, extensive and internally consistent, it holds authority. Such systems are difficult to question from within because they often presuppose the conditions by which they exist. For example, Euclidian geometry presupposes a number of postulates (more clearly than most systems of the world) in which one must have faith; upon acceptance of these principles, the entire system flows logically, and the only way one can escape the authority of the system is by refusing faith in the founding principles (as in non-Euclidian geometry), finding an internal contradiction, or by attempting to exist outside the system all together. A great deal of art has been made which supports or relies upon the systemic authority of deep space or flat space. When that art succeeds, it does so by reaffirming its system, and purging any deviance from it (one can think of Caravaggio or Mondrian in this respect). This pictorial authority defines the role of the viewer as a passive spectator. The viewer is presented with a completed system, and can only participate by accepting or rejecting the system (and everything that system connotes).

By juxtaposing flat and deep space, Hockney and Weischer dispel the authority of both pictorial and picture-plane systems. By presenting both systems together (without either being dominant), their paintings highlight the differences between the systems' founding principles. By coexisting side by side and operating under different premises, the systems cast doubt upon each other. The viewer in turn becomes a more active participant, as she is called to question and investigate the structure of the work. When the work is unsuccessful, the viewer sees the contradiction and dismisses the work. By rejecting the authority of a unified system delivered upon the viewer, Hockney and Weischer empower the viewer to take part in the creation of a new system. In these paintings, contradiction is the starting point rather than the breaking point. When the work is engaging, the viewer sees the contradiction but is compelled to question the systems that produced that contradiction and so adopt a new set of criteria by which the work can exist. In these paintings, content arises from the fissures of doubt rather than the towers of belief.

Works Cited

1.   Cantz, Hatje Verlag and authors. <u>Matthias Weischer: Simultan</u>. Germany: Hatje
        Cantz Verlag, 2004.

2.   Livingstone, Marco. <u>David Hockney</u>. London: Thames and Hudson, 1981.

Relevant un-cited works:

Stella, Frank. <u>Working Space</u>.