Reclaimed Zones: Guyton's Rooms

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During his travels in Italy in 1798, Johann-Wolfgang von Goethe famously made note of a remarkable shift taking place in the definition, practice, and perception of art. Up until that point art objects had always been made locally, and on order. Commissioned paintings and sculptures had been understood as an integral part of the building for which they were designed: luxury items used and consumed by particular patrons. These objects held meaning in the context of a daily life, particularly within the court and churches. They structured rituals, embodied hierarchies and histories, and usually did not leave the place for which they had been produced. As Goethe remarked, up until his era, "with few exceptions, works of art remained generally in the same location for which they are made. However, now a great change has occurred that, in general as well as specifically, will have important consequences for art."[1] The change was one of context: discrete objects were removed from a patron's life and placed in museums, where a new, broader public might contemplate them. In this new situation, artworks were no longer regarded as the private property of a church or aristocrat, but as part of the public realm. The shift Goethe had predicted is no less than a new definition, practice, and perception of art, and the mode that we know as modernism, and all that followed. This was not the start of a brief period style, but instead of an entire emergent epistemology: the invention of art history, art museums, and a new public sphere oriented around a sympathetic bourgeois audience. Goethe was articulating no less than an entirely new way for art to be seen and placed.

Put another way, art as we understand it today has only been around for some 200 years. And so it should perhaps come as no surprise that we should once again find ourselves in a moment of historical transition, facing remarkably similar questions and pressures with respect to art and its context. As we move from a physical to an increasingly digital culture, while the business of art grows ever more involved with financial speculation—and to an economy steeped in speculation—generations of artists are prompted to redefine the place of art, its material and modes of production, and dissemination. If Goethe observed the passage of one age to another, so we may offer witness to how our contemporary senses of space, place, time, and movement in art and culture also merely becomes stuff of memory.

Such a charged sense of transition resonates strongly with Wade Guyton's recent move from making individual paintings to seemingly site-specific installations—works that you might call "Guyton Rooms." As seen in a recent exhibition at Petzel Gallery in New York, these works are very much *in situ*: paintings made to fit rooms, define rooms, even become rooms of a kind. Such installations feel quiet, simple, powerfully resolved. Yet such stability would seem, on its face, to be at odds with the ephemerality and elusiveness of our evolving digital culture and economies. As the Petzel exhibition is just one part of a year's worth of works made for specific spaces, both institutional and commercial—including the Kunsthalle Zurich, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris—I want to think about these Guyton Rooms in relation to the history of placing art, asking how this artist's work might answer the following questions: Where does art live now? How are works seen and experienced? Who puts the pieces there, and under which circumstances?

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To engage with such questions, consider theorist Boris Groys' previous reflection on that historical moment when art moved from a patronage system to a museum system. As he observes, works at the time "were accessible and available as objects of contemplation. But they were not [yet] accessible and available as objects of purchase and sale. The classical museum is not allowed to sell its holdings. [Contemporary] art emerged out of this gesture of distancing with regard to the consumer context."[2] In other words, with the emergence of the museum came a new kind of aesthetic distancing of the art object from its beholder. But such distancing inevitably allowed for a second distancing in turn, as private collectors eventually joined the stage, with the result that artists found themselves caught between the protection of the museum and exposure to a new free market.

For his part, Guyton has always worked with contradictions, inserting his structures into larger systems and seeing how they respond to pressure. In this regard, one could say that his new Rooms are partly intended to respond to the changing art market, forcing questions of whether artists can control the parameters and meaning of their work—particularly when it becomes the focus of intense financial speculation in the economy of a vastly expanded art world. As Guyton explains, his new works are printed to fit their particular display spaces, which means that they are meticulously and laboriously installed over many days. Moreover, as the artist has said of his Rooms, considering the black, wall-size canvases with which they began: "I did think I was letting the black paintings 'un-become' paintings, or express themselves more architecturally. Or let the building or the spaces determine where the

paintings should end and relate to each other. And allow those pressures to give form to the work."[3] This aspect effectively slows the circulation of the works once they have been made, because rooms are much harder to collect than paintings. Indeed, the gesture itself is more difficult to grasp, introducing a pause when it comes to any impulse to collect: What are the implications of faithfully recreating a commercial gallery experience in toto within a domestic or institutional setting when one purchases such a room?

While prompting such questions is a form of artistic control, we must nevertheless take note of how Guyton is making his entire model subject to the terms of circulation. The work is now so specific that clients and patrons have difficulty replicating the rooms. Guyton must travel to potential sites to assess the locale, personally overseeing any installation, documentation, or de-installation. At times, a matching room simply cannot be built at this new location, and he must decide how to reconfigure the work for its new surroundings. But by virtue of how this modularity is now part of Guyton's work—in a sense, it *is* the work—it is the very sense of *locating* the art that is being transported. If the development of the installation form offered artists in previous times a way to respond to the dislocations of an emerging marketplace—as was the case for the Russian Constructivists and the French avant-garde—it must be acknowledged that curatorial and art historical practice soon followed suit. Art was eventually understood not merely as a thing, but as a space and set of spatial relationships. And when making Rooms, Guyton necessarily engages with this altered (or distanced, if you will) sense of location. Guyton has always had a talent for engaging questions of space in his work, although this aspect of his practice has been largely overlooked due to the excitement generated by his painting. For example, much of his early, spatially-aware work was produced for specific, local, physical contexts: his precisely reassembled pile of found scrap wood placed upside down under a bridge in *Brewster, New York* (2002), or the room-filling platform produced as his Master's thesis work at Hunter College, which effectively presented viewers with a figure of participation cast as an alienating obstacle. Such pieces were influenced both by 1960s and 1970s ideas—of Minimalism, Conceptual art, and site-specificity—and by 1990s ideas about evolving social relations between viewer, space, and object. Guyton's *Drawing for Sculpture the Size of a House* (2001)—a photograph showing domestic architecture blacked out with ink—might stand as a metaphor or emblem for this period, and as a harbinger of the artist's architecturally-determined work to come.

Guyton then moved to what would become his signature working style, which revolved around autonomous objects that were not tied to a specific locale: digitally printed canvases and "printer drawings," as well as "U" and chair sculptures. All these objects could circulate with ease, having been made to be owned; yet very quickly, and as important, Guyton underscored how they were to be moved and put into context. To explain the latter point, even as his pieces were being widely collected (or better, in response to that growing dynamic), the artist began once more to anchor the work in given spaces—placing sofas and chairs in relation to his paintings and displaying groups of his drawings in room-filling arrays of vitrines. He started importing the black, plywood floor of his studio into his exhibitions, claiming the very ground under viewers' feet for painting. These works could no longer be focused on as self-contained objects; they instead had to be considered as sets of works and gestures set in relationship with one another. Gradually, Guyton was forcing another sort of reception.

By extension, his most recent installations encompass the built architecture as a whole, yet the spatial dialogue among rooms is equally important as the interaction between paintings, or between paintings and sculptures, or paintings and furniture. In fact, in these most recent works it becomes unclear where the art begins or ends, or even how many pieces there are. Returning to the aforementioned Petzel exhibition, for instance, one could say that five paintings and a sculpture are on view; one could also say there are three separate pieces, because the rooms themselves have determined the fabrication parameters and constitute the artistic gesture, and there are, after all, three rooms. And would it not be important to consider not only the tension between the pairs of paintings in each room, but also the relationship between the two larger rooms and, in turn, how you move between them?

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Such work conflates the site of production and reception, and thus is chiefly activated through very specific invitations and commissions to make in situ work. To consider the implications for this artist who works primarily in situ, it might then be helpful to examine the work of two older practitioners of the form—artists who may initially seem to have little to do with one another, or with Guyton, but who arguably offer common ground and new insights for his work.

Taken at face value, John Knight would clearly seem to be a very different artist. Based on the West Coast, he belongs to an earlier generation, possessed by a deep personal grounding in Conceptual art and the beginnings of Institutional Critique. However, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has underlined Knight's context-specific art as a polemical, forced collapse of the distinctions between sculpture, architecture, and design,[4] and this approach offers a remarkable precedent for what is happening in Guyton's work. Like Knight, Guyton engages the relationship between primary site and secondary site: in his case, moving from *in situ* to *ex situ*, which often means from exhibition to book design. In addition, both artists pit the language of art against the language of design—although, very significantly, Knight emphasizes design as the apparatus standing at the base of capitalist ideology while Guyton (even as he may acknowledge Knight's point) puts the history of design to *use*, just as he does the history of art, drawing on aesthetic malleability and formal inspiration. Here, "use" can be a simple gesture: taking something that is already there—a

chair, the page of a book, a sofa, a painting, or a room—and adding to it, setting it against something else. Of course, the gesture must look easy, and it must look good; history must continue, even if it cannot be said to progress.

This distinction points to the most crucial difference between these two artists, which lies in their attitudes toward resistance: while they may share thematic strategies and interests, Knight's oeuvre and temperament are marked by explicit resistance, whether to the market, the art object, or the politics around art; whether to a wrong comment, inadequate writing, or all the tendencies of the rotten times we live in. Over the past four decades, Knight has maintained a high level of resistance to commercialization, making only selective engagements with institutions, and usually the in situ nature of his work carries an implicit critique. He stands for a refusal to compromise, and for a certain withdrawal. By contrast, Guyton displays a relative ease and openness that allows him to engage with many of art making's contradictions, setting the provocative simplicity of digitally-produced work against its complex physical needs, and the anonymous logic of code against the spatial-sensual manifestation of painting. In the process, he proposes links between design, capital, and technology that are quite similar to those emphasized in Knight's work, but only while embracing many of the art world's forms and forums. The generational difference has presented each artist with a specific set of options and limits; in other words, and Guyton may feel that he no longer has the option to take a purist position. As Buchloh has pointed out, formerly radical sculptural and spatial paradigms now represent "conditions of spatial domination and perceptual control against which any radical sculptural practice in the present inevitably would have to position itself."[5] In this respect, Guyton is a participant—perhaps we all are, and this paradox is precisely what leads him to pursue his recent formal strategies: How to be a participant and yet continue to challenge the relationships between art, architecture, technology, design, and site?

When he first arrived in New York, Guyton was extensively exposed to material forms and spatial relations that may shed light on the particular tensions with his work, and, more specifically, on some of his artistic choices and interests. Beginning in the mid-1990s and for nearly ten years, he was employed as a guard at the Dia Art Foundation in New York, where he was strongly affected by its ethos and its artists. In Dia's carefully considered former spaces—which were imbued with such a determinedly quiet and slow and refined institutional culture—it was often hard for a viewer to know whether a given piece had been produced for the space or preexisting work had been so thoughtfully arranged that art and space merged into one. Thanks to Dia's commitment to year-long exhibitions, Guyton was able to experience such works in-depth, for many hours every day, and in this environment he began to consider all the ways an artwork might be related to space, time, and the movement of the viewer.

Significantly, during this period Richard Serra exhibited his *Torqued Ellipses* at the museum. In an interview for that show's catalogue, Serra speaks about his interest in the "ways of relating movement to material space […] to think about sculpture in an open and extended field, in a way that is precluded when dealing with sculpture as an autonomous object." And then he goes on to say, echoing Dia's philosophy in a manner that is especially resonant with Guyton's recent work: "I found very important the idea of the body passing through space, and the body's movement not being predicated totally on image or sight or optical awareness, but on physical awareness in relation to space, place, time, movement."[6]

Like Knight, Serra has mainly made his work for institutions and public spaces, but he has also always made gallery shows, and does not seem to have any issues working with some of the most commercially powerful galleries. In fact, Serra needs them to support his projects, because over the course of his investigation of the relationship between site, work, and viewer, the work has developed uniquely stringent demands: larger spaces, reinforced floors, extra high ceilings, custom wall openings to import the sculptures, and so on. This is in situ artwork, to be sure, but the terms only allow for certain sites. The work does not simply respond to specific architectural or outdoor spaces, but tends to dominate, control, or redefine the situation, for better or for worse. As with Guyton's recent work, Serra's sculptures are explicitly made for commercial contexts, but they acknowledge implicitly that the terms for such contexts have changed—he pushes against their limits, making them more concrete—if you buy the piece you are going to have to set up a very special place to show it.

The pressures on Guyton's work—and possibly on that of his entire generation—are of course quite different than those that may have initially pushed Serra to explore similar ideas. In Guyton's case, it may well be a very contemporary loss of control having to do with digital abstraction that has provoked a new level of specific engagement with the physical, material details of the work—or more precisely, with the mutability of such physical, material details. In other words, it is possible that we are living through a watershed moment in art comparable to the earlier transition observed by Goethe. This may be a crude, early stage—a digital "Stone Age" of flaws and complexity—but we do know that we are redefining all forms of production, reproduction, communication, and dissemination, leading to deep structural shifts in the practice, perception, and place of art. Certainly, in culture at large, a belief in progress has been replaced by flexibility with uncertainty. Philosopher Zygmunt Baumann, for instance, suggests that this shift reflects a culture of digital "liquidity," in which the emphasis on art's autonomy has changed: "If in its 'solid' phase the heart of modernity was in controlling and fixing the future … under conditions of liquidity anything could happen yet nothing can be done with confidence and certainty."[7] A century ago, to be "modern" meant progress and the pursuit of some final state of perfection. Now it means infinite minor changes, with no final state in sight, and perhaps none desired. As the artist Seth Price, a close colleague of Guyton's, recently put it: "It was a deep

irony that the mechanisms of digital culture were built on a binary fundament even as that culture sought to eradicate all opposition, contradiction, and friction on an ontological level, steadily reducing human variety to a kind of affirmative mush."[8]

In this situation, all artists and intellectuals thus face the question of how to regain a sense of control over what one is making, who it might be for, and where it goes. The early 21st century has presented installation-based artwork with striking difficulties, including not only the ever-expanding art market and its overproduction of consumer objects, but also a loss of control over material reality. To cite Buchloh once more: "[W]hatever spatial relations and material forms one might still experience outside of the … spectacularized spaces of control, and electronic digitization, they now appear merely as abandoned zones, as residual objects and leftover spaces, rather than as elementary givens from which new spatial parameters and new object relations could be configured in sculptural terms in the present."[9]

In a way, Guyton's new work points to the tensions of these abandoned zones, for it merges "abandoned" computational space and "wasted" physical space. At Petzel, these abandoned zones and elementary givens were the focus of the exhibition: three bare rooms, canvas, the colors black and white. What we look at and walk through was produced with a digital file and an Epson 11880 printer, yet the project was also made through the complex physical interactions of handling and placing. Each work was printed on folded, extra-long rolls of Belgian linen; each displays two black rectangles printed in such a way that they are not quite lined up, before extending to a sort of "left-over" area of off-white fabric surface, which is marked with the gray streaks and faint lines that result from having been pulled through Guyton's printer.

Walking through the Guyton Rooms opens up a further understanding of their particular tensions. The artist's canvas works are usually hung vertically, but here are put forward as horizontals, in effect measuring the architectural space from corner to corner. The works are installed in pairs, one pair to a room, and each pair marks a space within the architecture that differs from the containment of the architecture. Each pair reclaims the space by making it palpable, demarcating its limits and parameters. The installation brings the two main gallery rooms into a curious relationship, again dependent on one's movement within the space: The room in the back is framed by two wall-filling canvas pieces that meet in a corner; and the preceding, narrower room is defined by two wall-length works facing off against one another. Walking through the gallery, one experiences the rooms' spatial relations—their volumes, the differing ceiling heights, the movements of the canvas pairs, the changing light, the concrete floor and its small shifts in tone. When one enters the spaces held by these black-and-white planar pairs, one's body registers the simultaneous compression and extension of the space; one is pulled into the rooms and then immediately and subtly pushed out again. The surrounding walls seem to exude pressure: the black absorbs the light, the white areas reflect the light, and gesture the space's physicality shifts as one moves within it. All this recalls something Serra said: "[Y]our vision is peripatetic and not reduced to framing an image. It includes and is dependent upon memory and anticipation … The relationship of time, space, walking, and looking."[10]

Guyton's Rooms at Petzel quietly hold in suspension the tension between the digital and physical. In a simple gesture they freeze the historical moment in which we find ourselves, a point of paradigmatic transition. On the one hand are the digital files and the robotic printing machines that are fed linen and which, with a push of a button, spit out the coveted canvases. (When I recently saw the large Epson printers rolled into a corner of Guyton's studio, they looked a bit weary, but forever hungry to produce.) On the other hand, we have the familiar, old-fashioned, slow, physical world, with its laws and limits as to size, weight, movement, light, gravity, humidity, and the endless potential for perfection and tweaking that defines art in situ.

These contradictory components contribute to the work's particular energy, which has to do with desire and scale: a balance between attraction and repulsion, an invitation and an unyielding force, abstraction and figuration. And figuration here means a viewer's bodily awareness as well as the act of giving figure to the abstraction of digital production itself. This is what is haunting about the Guyton Rooms. They offer a corporeal experience of this new cultural condition of digital abstraction and digital liquidity, even as we live in a physical world defined by the perspective of one person in one place at one time.

1. Johann-Wolfgang Goethe, introduction to his *Propyläen, Goethes sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5, Paris: Tétotes Frères, 1836, p. 486.
2. Boris Groys, "What Is Art?/Everyone Has to Be an Artist/After the End of Mass Culture/Egypt as Quick Run," in *The Future of Art: A Manual*, ed. Ingo Nierman, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2011, p. 219–237.
3. Guyton in an email to the author, July 24, 2014.
4. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Knight's Negations," in *John Knight: October Files 16*, ed. André Rottmann, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2014, p. 161.
5. Buchloh, "Knight's Negations," p. 159–160.
6. Richard Serra, "Interview with Richard Serra by Lynne Cooke and Michael Govan," in *Richard Serra: Torqued Ellipses*, Dia Center for the Arts, New York 1997, p. 27–28.
7. Zygmunt Baumann, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity, Cambridge 2012, p. x, xiv.
8. Seth Price, *Fuck Seth Price*, Leopard, New York 2015, p. 21.
9. Buchloh, "Knight's Negations," p. 160.
10. Serra, "Interview with Richard Serra by Lynne Cooke and Michael Govan," p. 28–29.