

# Repetition to monochrome: surfaces for picture making by Herzog & de Meuron and Ellsworth Kelly

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## Introduction

Painting and architecture are models of thought with a number of common preoccupations, one of which is representation. In this paper I will use Jacques Lacan's seminar 'What is a Picture?' as my starting point in order to discuss architecture as a discourse of the visual and particularly to consider the wall surface as a place for picture making.

In both architecture and painting, surface and space are thought in relation to each other. Ellsworth Kelly has explored the surface through acts of repetition (*Cité*) as well as singularity (*Yellow Curve*). Herzog & de Meuron, referring to their two first Ricola buildings, talk about the structure of the façade as an image and the surface becoming spatial. It is the restrained relationship between singularity and repetition that makes the impact of these surfaces so commanding. In different ways Kelly and Herzog & de Meuron have explored repetition as a generative and, partly, anti-compositional method of making. But it is intriguing that while Herzog & de Meuron have insisted on their use of repetition, Kelly gradually distanced his work from repetition in favour of singularity. I will attempt to show that Kelly used repetition as a mode of development rather than conclusion. His more recent monochromes and flat picture objects seem to point to simultaneity, rather than repetition, a far more interesting concept for architecture.

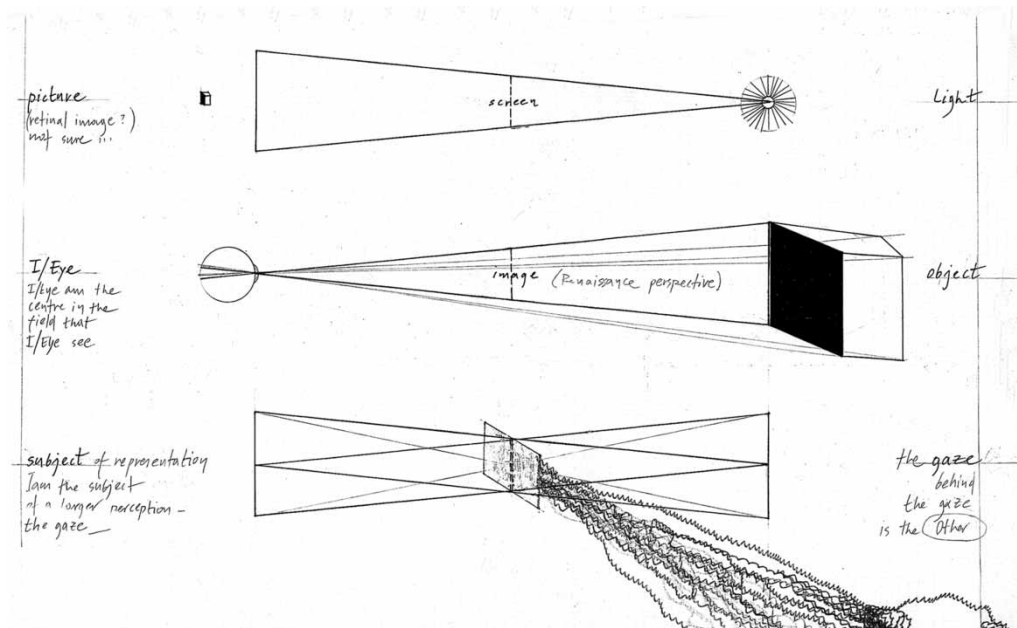
## What is a Picture?

In his seminar 'What is a Picture?' Lacan draws two overlapping triangles which point in opposite directions to suggest that the eye and the gaze function together in the domain of vision (Fig. 1). The diagram is perplexing but Lacan explains that the two triangles must be inverted at the same time as they must be placed one upon each other. The eye and the gaze form always an ambiguous 'chiasma', he insists. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has tried to explain the function of perception with more clarity through the use of the metaphor of the glove and Lacan reiterates this choice of words when he states that the structure of the visual functions like turning the finger of a glove inside out. The gaze 'is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which ... I am photo-graphed'. The gaze creates the context of the I/Eye: 'I am looked at.... I am a picture'.<sup>1</sup>

Considering the function of painting in line with Lacan's thought, I would suggest that the subject of the painting alternates between two conditions: from being the image/screen seen by the viewer to being the object/gaze 'under the regard' of the painter. In front of the painting the viewer desires to see but *without* the gaze. In aiming to answer the question 'what is a painting?', Lacan develops the following argument:

The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed

Figure 1. An interpretation of Lacan's schema of the eye and the gaze. (Drawing by the Author, 2003.)



up thus —*You want to see? Well, take a look at this!* He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one's weapons. This is the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the *laying down*, of the gaze.<sup>2</sup>

If a painting invites the viewer to seek relaxation from the gaze, a building seems to do the opposite. According to Lacan the gaze emerges in the spatial domain as the feeling that one might be watched.

But this imagined response is not an object in space but a possible appearance of space. It is not the window itself, but what the window sustains, the possibility of someone appearing there to watch me:

The window if it gets a bit dark and if I have reasons for thinking that there is someone behind it, is straightway a gaze. From the moment this gaze exists, I am already something other, in that I feel myself becoming an object for the gaze of others. But in this position which is a reciprocal one, others know that I am an object who knows himself to be seen.<sup>3</sup>

### Picture-Wall

Architecture is a discourse of the visual. Buildings favour or discourage seeing. Walls allow or block views and allow or filter flows of light; they mediate the gaze and sustain the viewer in the position of a desiring subject, wanting to see and be seen. Beatriz Colomina has noted that 'architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant'.<sup>4</sup> If architecture provides a primal protection from seeingness, it does so, not only by influencing conditions of viewing but also, through its ability to manifest itself as image. We can then rework Colomina's proposition to say that architecture is a viewing mechanism which above all produces itself as an image. It is in this sense that Lacan's thought is worth examining.

An external wall presents an objective set of characteristics — the structural and material order of building parts — but also the location where all sorts of subjectivities — expectations, fantasies, errors, and desires — can be projected. The wall is what we see, an image. With the image we see but we also hide, we screen seeing. Consequently the wall is also what we don't see: a 'guard' blocking-up images in order to protect us. In this discourse of the visual the wall acts as a picture plane. It is a 'sieve', permitting, blocking or reflecting views and light; a representation or withholding of the space that exists behind; a sign or surface for allegorical meaning; a site of references and citations to other walls and the history of architecture itself.

This complex architectural surface, call it a 'picture-wall', can be understood as a Lacanian screen. The meaning of the screen is as obscure as many other

terms Lacan uses but we can at least simply say that the screen is essentially the locus of our visual representations, where we tame the gaze into images. The screen mediates the gaze, but also protects us from it. Hal Foster writes:

Call it the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture, this screen *mediates* the object-gaze *for* the subject, but it also *protects* the subject *from* this object-gaze. That is, it captures the gaze, 'pulsatile, daz-zling and spread out', and *tames* it in an image. ... for we have access to the symbolic — in this case to the screen as the site of picture making and viewing, where we can manipulate and moderate the gaze. ... for to see without this screen would be to be blinded by the gaze or touched by the real.<sup>5</sup>

For Foster the gaze is interpreted by the subject as the traumatic point of reality. Andy Warhol's silk-screens are an obvious example: repeating in order to negotiate trauma, consumerism, the burden of the everyday. But does the use of repetition in architecture suggest a negotiation of the complexity of perception or a defence against the threat of the real? Peggy Phelan has discussed the subject of repetition in architecture in her essay 'Building the Life Drive; Architecture as Repetition', where she makes interesting links between Warhol and the architects Herzog & de Meuron.<sup>6</sup> Focusing on Ellsworth Kelly's work, this paper partly aims to extend Phelan's discussion of repetition by defining the architectural wall as a picture-making surface for the *visitor* as much as the author. Kelly's transformation of the use of repetition in his work will be used as a critical method.

Figure 2. Stacks of planks: Ricola Warehouse, Laufen. (Photographs by James Daykin (left) and Phil Obayda (right), 2003.)



In the 1980s and early 1990s, Herzog & de Meuron directly interrogated the rôle of external building surfaces and made strong associations between architecture, painting, printing and photography. The architects set considerable emphasis on the material and conceptual articulation of the building envelope and brought architecture to its most commonsensical aesthetic conclusion when they started making walls that purposefully and coherently exposed the logic of their making into an image, that is when they began treating the wall as

a picture plane. The picture-making surface was the driving theme for the design of their two first Ricola buildings, the Warehouse in Laufen (1986–7) and the Packing and Distribution Building in Mulhouse-Brunstatt (1992–3). In different ways these buildings express a conscientious questioning of *what the wall is* through doing things again and again, and through manifesting this repetitive process explicitly through the making of picture-walls.

The Ricola Warehouse is based on the idea of stacking: a stack of planks is divided into three



Figure 3. The horizontal bands as they increase upwardly: Ricola Warehouse, Laufen. (Photograph by James Daykin, 2003.)

zones of five layers each. Supporting scaffolds and planks construct a wall envelope which feels like a tall pile leaning its weight towards us. But they also construct an image of repeated horizontal bands with their height upwardly increasing to counteract the foreshortening process of perspective (Figs 2, 3). The Warehouse's long façade faces in close proximity the surface of an impressive large rock which makes in turn a different image,

the image of nature. Repetition constitutes an almost non-penetrative screen, an architecture that is visually as solid as the rock next to it. The stack of planks seems to push us as far away as possible but we feel trapped between the surface of the building and the surface of the rock (Fig. 4).

The Ricola Packing and Distribution Building, on the other hand, is read against another interesting natural setting, this time a series of trees. The

Figure 4. Between the building and the rock: Ricola Warehouse, Laufen. (Photograph by James Daykin, 2003.)



building is dominated by a serial arrangement of panels printed with a leaf photographed by Karl Blossfeldt. The repeated panels make a curtain wall but also *the image of* a curtain (Figs 5, 6). One of the architects' intentions was to use the leaf pattern in order to manifest the non-tectonic essence and non-load bearing function of the wall. Un-patterned clear openings interrupt the printed motif to highlight inhabitation as a fugitive presence against repetition. At night the building uses light to switch on and off possibilities for viewing, self-reflection and voyeurism (Fig. 7).<sup>7</sup>

In both the Warehouse and the Packing and Distribution Building Herzog & de Meuron employ repetition as an anti-representational weapon: like

a process that eliminates the symbolic value of the single unit. Repetition dresses the interior and dissolves the structural mass. It constructs an ambivalence between the image made, the pictorial skin, and the building made, the heaviness of the body of the building. The interpretive eye tries to understand the image and the building simultaneously. The gaze oscillates into the body of the building, questioning our habits of seeing and searching for change. But it is the natural setting of the two buildings, as much as anything else, that notionally interrupts the picture-wall, evoking a sense of difference and resistance to the repetitive surface. Herzog & de Meuron are very much aware of the strong aesthetic and psychological tension that they create between building, nature and viewer. For them repetition is an activity of building, screening, dressing, signing, as well as citing other works and artefacts, but also an architectural idea which concerns spatial experience and perception.

'Phenomenological questions have always played a salient role, for instance questions of sensual perception or of signified and signifier', they have stated.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere they observe: 'what interests us in projects and buildings is modelling, creating an instrument for the perception of reality and our interaction with it'.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this phrase also explains the architects' commonality with art. Jacques Herzog has frequently suggested conceptual links between architecture and art, particularly photography and art objects that focus on the visual and material quality of things. The architects' successful collaboration with Rémy Zaugg, Thomas Ruff and Jeff Wall, amongst others, their recurrent reference to Joseph Beuys and their view that art



Figure 5. View through the trees: Ricola Packing and Distribution Building, Mulhouse-Brunstatt. (Photograph by Markus Lobmaier, 2003.)

is more radical and ahead of architecture, reinforce the most significant evidence which is, in this case, the Ricola buildings themselves.

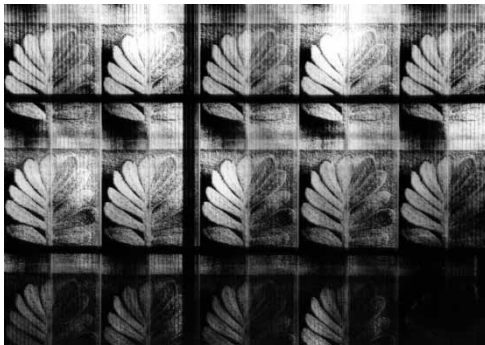
Herzog & de Meuron are interested in conceiving of the highly patterned external surfaces of their Ricola Warehouse and Packing and Distribution Building as picture-making walls. They are extremely aware of art theory and practice, visual and critical theory, including sub-Lacanian ideas as interpreted for example by architectural writers such as Colomina. Their use of repetition on the Ricola surfaces works extraordinarily well because the flatness of the surface matches the notion of the picture plane. But I would argue that the architects' insistent application of repetition in their recent more sculptural projects, such as their two extension proposals for the Tate Modern, is rather unsatisfactory. This is because the use of repetition in

three dimensions loses its association with the flat picture-plane and its visceral object-gaze impact on the visitor.

### **Repetition to monochrome**

Painting and architecture are practical and theoretical models of thinking which can critique and advance each other in a dialectical discourse of the visual. In *Painting as Model* the art critic Yve-Alain Bois discusses the value of painting as a theoretical practice, a generative model for the production of thought.<sup>10</sup> His theoretical interest in painting has driven him to write several critical texts about artists, one of which is about Ellsworth Kelly. Bois' examination of the drawings that Kelly produced in the early 1950s in France is underpinned by the very interesting range of philosophical positions that these works possess. In the book *Ellsworth*

Figure 6. Detailed view  
of panels: Ricola  
Packing and  
Distribution Building,  
Mulhouse-Brunstatt.  
(Photograph by Markus  
Lobmaier, 2003.)



*Kelly: The Early Drawings 1948–1955*, Bois discusses the work under four principal themes: transfer, chance, modular grid and monochrome panel. He is particularly interested in Kelly's drawings of windows, a frequent — and rather Lacanian — subject in the artist's work of this time.

According to Bois, these window drawings manifest with phenomenal clarity the difference between indexical transfer and iconic representation: 'as soon as the artist records any spatial recession, no matter how frontal the image, one moves from index to icon, and with this move a point of view is implied, and thus a subjective agency.'<sup>11</sup> Kelly's understanding of index refers to the objective rules of orthographic projection in architectural drawing (plan or elevation) whereas the icon refers to pictorial representations, more typically associated with the use of perspective in painting. Artists and architects tend to separate the two modes of representation but Kelly's uses of index and icon paradoxically and interestingly overlap and mix.

Kelly moved away from the index/icon problem, as a common dilemma for representation, when he started exploring the idea of chance. In his early career he observed chance simply as a found image which he then transferred in drawing. But around 1951 his exploration of chance took a more interesting direction. Kelly now began an ongoing pursuit of objectivity, an art made by anybody for anybody with the use of repetition. It was mainly the modular grid that enabled the exploration of this kind of universal aesthetic.

*Cité* (1951), one of his most notable aleatory pieces, is made from twenty joined wood panels: black stripes of unequal width (corresponding to a freehand sketch) were painted on a wood surface which was then cut up into separate pieces and arranged into a collage in grid fashion (Fig. 8). Relationships between unit to unit and unit to whole were explored physically through splitting, rotating, removing and replacing. Repetition allowed Kelly to bring pieces together but, perhaps more significantly, to separate them. By 1955 we see his studies for paintings in individual panels.<sup>12</sup>

Repetition as an activity influenced Kelly to think also about expanding his work to larger projects, quite architectural in size. His ambition for *Cité* was to take up the exterior wall of a building. 'To hell with pictures — they should be the wall — even better — on the outside wall — of large buildings', he argued.<sup>13</sup> In 1957 Kelly's vision was finally reached with *Sculpture for a Large Wall*: a large relief with four rows of 104 coloured individual panels of anodised aluminum which stood upright or tilted backward and forward on horizontal rods (Fig. 9). The piece measured approximately 3,50 m



Figure 7. Night view:  
Ricola Packing and  
Distribution Building,  
Mulhouse-Brunstatt.  
(Photograph by Markus  
Lobmaier, 2003.)

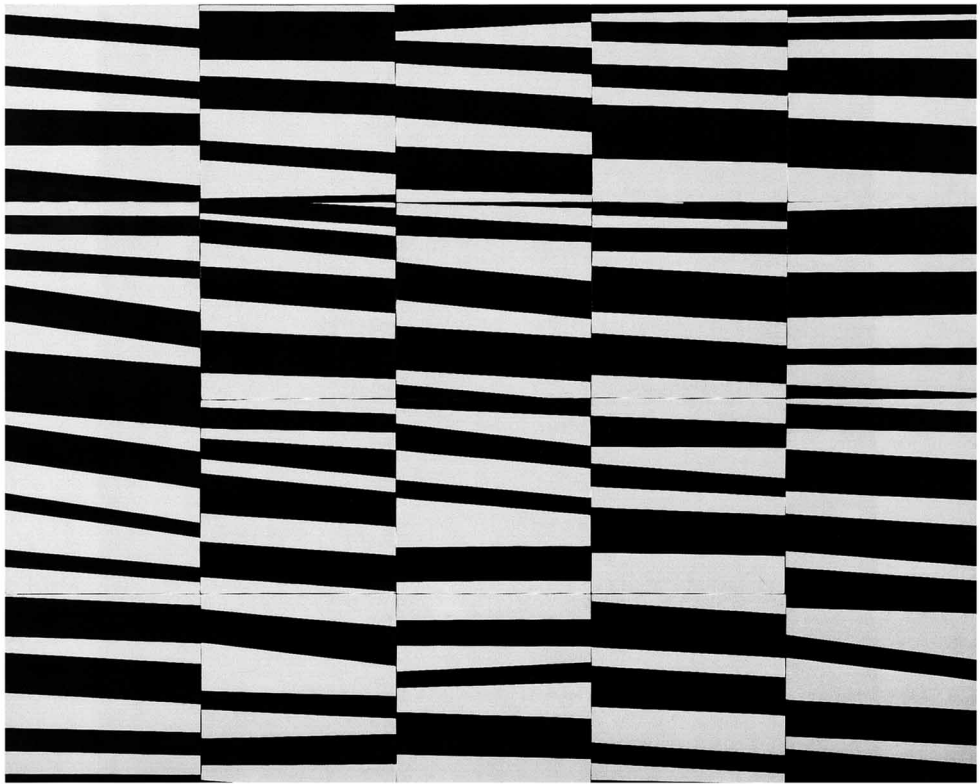
×20 m×0,70 m. The 68 gaps between the panels (empty locations) were as important as the panels themselves.

Both panels and gaps produced a repertoire of shapes which motivated the artist's later monochrome panels. The balance between positive and negative, figure and ground, and colour and white was impressive (Fig. 10). The project took the status of an architectural piece and in May, 1957, was featured on the cover of the *Architectural*

*Record*. Although there is no evidence that Herzog & de Meuron have studied this project, we can notice a similar sensibility in the structural logic of the scaffold and the tilted panels of the Ricola Warehouse.

The use of repetition in art has been questioned as elimination, capable of destroying the significance of the singular unit and even the imagination. Rosalind Krauss has pointed out that the grid in painting is a mode of repetition which is 'extremely

Figure 8. Ellsworth Kelly, *Cité*, 1951: oil on wood, twenty joined panels  $58\frac{1}{2} \times 70\frac{3}{4} \times 2$  inches (148.6  $\times$  179.7  $\times$  5.1 cm); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and anonymous private collectors. (Photograph by courtesy of the Artist.)



restrictive' and 'difficult to use in the service of invention'.<sup>14</sup> If this is true, why do the Ricola buildings seem to have the opposite effect on the visitor? Krauss' discussion of the grid goes beyond its structure to highlight its aesthetic effect and 'mythical power': the grid 'makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a

release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)'.<sup>15</sup> Materialism and illusion, both at once, seem to present an interesting conflict of ideas. Herzog & de Meuron's library at Eberswalde brings this phenomenon at its peak: adding piece by piece and seeing bit by bit, we feel the ambivalence between the weight of the architecture versus the immateriality of the image. Gerhard Mack argues:



Figure 9. Ellsworth Kelly, *Sculpture for a Large Wall* at the Transportation Building, Penn Center, Philadelphia, 1957. (Photograph by Lawrence S. Williams, by courtesy of the Artist.)



Figure 10. Ellsworth Kelly, detail of *Sculpture for a Large Wall* at the Transportation Building, Penn Center, Philadelphia, 1957. (Photograph by Lawrence S. Williams, by courtesy of the Artist.)

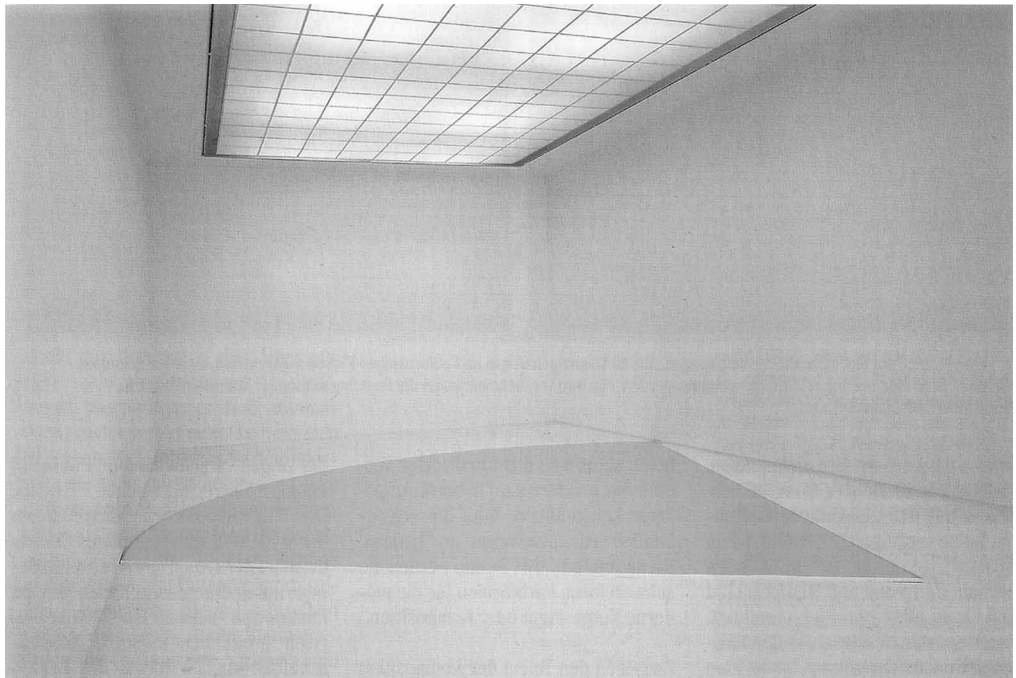
Rather than asking what a volume or a wall is, they [the architects] question our ideas and expectations in relation to a volume of a wall. Correspondingly, they define the categories of architecture as categories of perception, which allows them to situate their buildings astride the borderline of hitherto borderline concepts. The library at Eberswalde is both a concrete cube and a pictorial skin — at the same time stereometric and planar, monolithic and alive like a tattooed body. The minimalist volume disturbs the images, the images blur the volume. The concrete panels are heavy, the images almost immaterial.<sup>16</sup>

The visual effect of repetition on the grand flat surface of a picture-wall is a perceptual paradox: it

constructs an image that almost covers the viewer's field of vision while it also 'constructs' the huge weight of the body of the building. The ambivalence between weight and image has an awakening effect. The eye repeats images in an automatic sense; the gaze may appear suddenly to astonish. The gaze belongs in the spatial, not visual, domain but it appears in the domain of visual representations as a disturbing element, an accident that spoils the image. After all the perception of a building can be interpreted as an accident.<sup>17</sup>

The reality of a building does not necessarily agree with how it is being made but rather finds its impact in how it is being perceived. Herzog & de Meuron achieve drawing difference out of repetition, not in the physical presence of the finished surface but in the ways the surface may be interpreted. The patterned Ricola surfaces are seen as spatial because their visual order can highlight otherness and change. Since then the architects have moved their interest in repetition beyond the articulation of the flat picture-wall to more three-dimensional

Figure 11. Ellsworth Kelly, *Yellow Curve*, 1990: acrylic on canvas on wood, 306 × 292 × 1 inches (777.2 × 741.7 × 2.5 cm); commissioned by Portikus am Main, Frankfurt. (Photograph: Katrin Schilling, by courtesy of the Artist.)



applications. But the service of repetition in three dimensions does not have the same paradoxical impact between image and weight on the visitor. And it is rather tiresome. Herzog & de Meuron can perhaps learn a lot from an artist like Kelly, who gradually distanced his practice from the theme of repetition and worked with flat monochrome objects instead. Kelly's *Yellow Curve* is a fitting example.

*Yellow Curve* at Portikus was realised in 1990 as an installation of a large bright yellow panel covering most of the floor of the gallery room (Fig. 11). The panel was shaped as a segment of a

circle and was obliquely positioned on the floor. The intersections of its curved side with its two straight sides touched the walls at two nonsymmetrical points. Here Kelly presents himself as a painter whose job is to cover surfaces with paint rather than a painter who, strictly speaking, makes pictures. Form, surface, colour, light and room are explored as an inseparable whole. What is at stake in this project, in terms of perception, is space rather than pattern. There is no trace of repetition in the presence of the panel as such — the surface is single and continuous. But the colour vibrates

and has an extraordinary spatial impact on the room. A yellow glow fills the space as the colour seems to transform into light, affecting differently each wall. The picture plane has collapsed and the problem of index/icon is altogether surpassed. To return to Lacan, something important is here given to the viewer, something that suggests the possibility of 'laying down' the gaze.

Kelly used repetition as a method of development rather than conclusion. His abandonment of repetition in favour of monochromes was sensibly considered through working in work-series in a trial and error mode. Kelly's course of work can be seen as a critical method for architecture. It challenges Herzog & de Meuron's insistence on repetition ever since the 1980s and, more significantly, I would propose that it puts into question the excessive fascination of current processes of architectural design and fabrication with pattern making, supported by a rather narrow use of digital technology.

Fortunately, and interestingly enough for architecture, contemporary painting on the whole has not been as consumed by repetition. *Yellow Curve* at Portikus is an exceptionally useful example for architects, although not the only one. At the heart of this piece is an appreciation for the continuum and simultaneity of perception. This flat seamless monochrome surface is just right for the visitor, free from repetition, an ideal plane for picture making and the imagination.

### Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Níall McLaughlin for sharing with me his observations about the Ricola buildings during our field trip in 2003 and for a number of related stimulating conversations ever since.

### Notes and references

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trs., Alan Sheridan (New York, Norton, 1998; first published in English in 1978), p.106.
2. *Ibid.*, p.101.
3. In this passage Lacan is referring to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*; quoted in Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1994), p.250.
4. *Ibid.*, p.250. According to Colomina Adolf Loos's interiors tend to 'trap the gaze' constructing an enclosure of symmetrical positions between the subject and the object. In contrast Le Corbusier's buildings tend to create open viewing sequences where the subject is placed in the position of the voyeur while the gaze tends to slip away. It is worth noticing this schematic division has its limitations as it oversimplifies Loos's and Le Corbusier's work.
5. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1996), p.140.
6. Peggy Phelan, 'Building the Life Drive; Architecture as Repetition', in *Herzog & de Meuron: Natural History*, ed., Philip Ursprung (Montreal/Baden, Canadian Centre of Architecture/Lars Müller Publishers, 2002), pp.289–307.
7. In the Ricola Marketing Building in Laufen (1998–9) the architects use real curtains and real plants arranged as a series of colourful veils. This spatial superimposition of nature and building depends to a certain extent also on repetition, although less directly.
8. Herzog & de Meuron in *Herzog & de Meuron 1978–2002, Architecture and Urbanism*, special issue (June, 2002), p.8.
9. Jacques Herzog, 'The Hidden Geometry of Nature', in, Gerhard Mack, *Herzog & de Meuron, 1978–1988, The*

- Complete Works*, vol. 1 (Birkhäuser Verlag, 1997), p.209.
10. Bois has argued that painting produces four particular models: the perceptive, the technical, the symbolic and the strategic; Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1990), pp.245–57.
  11. Bois, *Ellsworth Kelly: The Early Drawings, 1948–1955* (Harvard University Arts Museums/Kunstmuseum, Winterthur, Richter Verlag, 1999), p.19.
  12. See, for example, the series *Study for a Painting in Four Separated Panels* (1955).
  13. Kelly in a letter to John Cage written in 1950: quoted in Harry Cooper, 'An Intense Detachment: Ellsworth Kelly's *Line Form Color*', in Kelly, *Line Form Color* (Harvard University Arts Museums, 1999), p.20.
  14. Rosalind Kraus, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernists Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1985), pp.151–70.
  15. Kraus, 'Grids', *ibid.*, p.12.
  16. Gerhard Mack, 'Building with Images: Herzog & de Meuron's Library at Eberswalde', *Eberswalde Library: Herzog & de Meuron* (London, Architectural Association, 2000), p.48.
  17. According to Aristotle things which are not substance, like the perception of an object, are accidents.

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