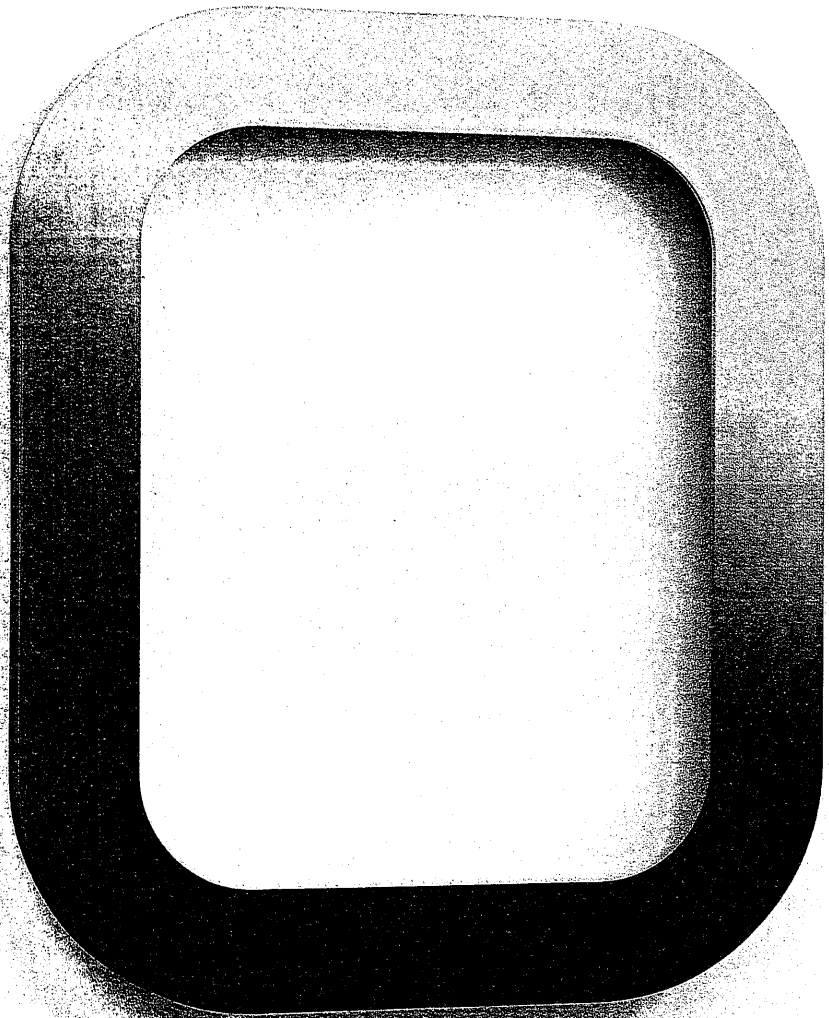


Ret. Gerold Miller get ready, Naual gelase im Hamburger Bahnhof, Heidelberg 2002

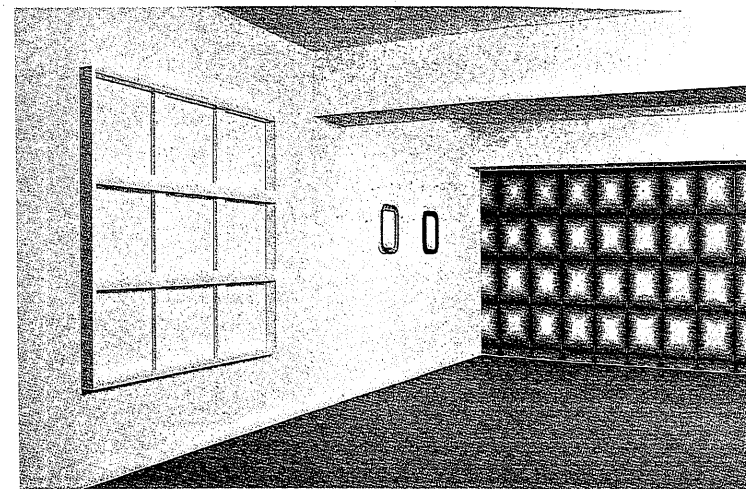


Pictureless frame as object and picture by Peter Weibel (2002)

T. 129-133

Gerold Miller's re-framing of the framing problem falls within a long modernistic tradition. Frames were originally used to enclose sacred images, fitting precisely around the picture area to make it stand out from the background. The frame usually consisted of simple rectangular strips of wood, often painted gold. Then Gothic winged altars usually have elaborate baldacchino-like carving, pointed-arched fields with decorative pinnacled gables framing the image, as for example in Simone Martini's *Annunciation* (1333, Uffizi Florence), so that it is no longer possible to distinguish between the architecture of the altar retable and the architectural setting that frames it. This relationship between the artistically designed rear wall of an altar and the surrounding architecture, in other words between the wall with the image on it and the space it occupies, is precisely the reference point for Miller's investigation of the difference between sculpture and the picture as an object beyond the representation crisis. (In his article *Das Kunstwerk. Der Ort der Malerei*,¹ John Berger pointed out that even before the picture frame „the regular format of a painted area – whether it was rectangular, round or oval“ – produced the effect of a frame. „The picture has edges, and as they are geometrical, they enclose it“ So the frame represents the outer form enclosing the picture, which makes composition essential. The compositional function of the frame is maintained, with the difference that previously it had been directed at what was inside it, in other words the picture, whereas now it makes itself independent and the frame itself becomes a composition. Though in this case the frame changes from picture format into a wall sculpture. (Of course frames have always not simply accompanied and framed pictures, they led a life of their own, even before the Modern epoch. Modernism just radicalized the independence of the frame and rendered it absolute. (The Renaissance developed new forms for the frame, circular for the tondo, and the aedicule as a sacred shrine, intended to emphasize the sense of spatial illusion.² So the function of the frame also expanded with the stylistic development of Renaissance painting. It served not only as a support for the picture, but became the most important instrument in terms of pictorial structure through the creative force of its form and proportions. In the pictorial theme of the *Sacra Conversazione* developed by the Renaissance, the Madonna with Child and flanking saints is often surrounded by illusionistic mock architecture made up of columns, pilasters and coffered barrel vaults. Here the columns in the framing architecture placed in front of the picture area are allotted the task of continuing the illusionistic stage set effect as a real zone. Andrea Mantegna's high altar in San Zeno (1457–59, Verona) is a convincing example of a function of the frame suggesting a spatial imagination. (In parallel with this aesthetic dimension of the frame, acquired by taking up the internal decoration of the picture through its size and structure, its function on the plane of content can also be established, as the frame tells the „framing story“ in the form of texts or attributive images relating to the subject of the picture, as a narrative (129)

montage, as a piece of genuine symbolism, for example in Vincenzo Foppa's Madonna *Mary with the Book* (1464-68, Castello Sforzesco, Milano). (The relationship between frame and space also changed with the so-called Copernican revolution and the loss of the anthropocentric world picture. The classical rules of picture construction were suspended, continuous development of spatial depth was abandoned in favour of dominant diagonal compositions, expressing themselves in a powerful suggestion of depth and extraordinary movement dynamics that threatened to break the frame altogether. This tendency was further and considerably heightened by Baroque art, which tried to remove the boundaries between appearance and reality in accordance with the changed world view. (Form opened up to infinity, blurring all formal boundaries, was the sought-after goal, and this was appropriately implemented in illusionistic ceiling paintings or Baroque high altars. The size of Baroque panel pictures made the frame into a defining link between the picture and the interior decoration. It rose to supreme heights of craft mastery, in order to enhance the impression of magnificence given by the space. Through the various materials, ranging from fine woods with rich marquetry to often lavish ornament, the frame underlined the exquisite qualities of the painting. The frame was able to make itself independent for the first time, entering into competition with the picture and becoming an art object in its own right. The famous mid-18th century Chippendale frames are a perfect example. (Towards the middle of the 19th century, in the age of progressive industrialization and mass production, the frame became increasingly less important. It was certainly still a major element in pictorial creation for painters like Georges Seurat, as an integrating component for empirical colour studies, and in the Jugendstil movement the frame was a creative device that was often drawn into the pictorial composition. But then historicism reduced the frame to its original supporting function as an autonomous decorative element. Elaborate mass-produced plaster borders, heavy and solid-looking because of the homogeneous gilding, were followed by slender strips of wood or metal, which were soon replaced in their turn by simple stretchers, until finally frames were abandoned completely. (Probably the first example of a painting presented without a frame was Pablo Picasso's portrait of *Gertrude Stein*, which the artist started in 1906 but did not complete until 1908, without a model and from memory. By taking this drastic step of removing the border between the picture and the surrounding area, Picasso was emphasizing the artist's absolute freedom to act exactly as he wished, and thus opened up new dimensions for painting. (Maurice Denis is certainly a stimulating thinker in advance of his time in this context. In his famous thesis as an introduction to his *Definition of Neo-Traditionalism* (1890) he took the picture back to its original function as a piece of canvas. Henri Matisse was equally ground-breaking for the further development of painting. He demanded unconditional surrender of perspective in favour of purely two-dimensional pictorial composition. (Lucio Fontana fits in entirely with the tradition of the primacy of the picture. By deliberately slitting open the canvas he not only endowed the empty form with positive formal value, (130)



as a compositional interplay of cavity and surrounding space, with mutual interpenetration, he also took the final logical step of questioning the frame's restricting ordering principle, as well as that of the picture itself. (It would be possible to list a whole number of other artistic positions that made fundamental steps in their efforts to de-substantialize form, colour, surface and canvas, or to make them absolute, from Malevich, Rodchenko, Delaunay, Mondrian and Arp to Newman, Rothko or Reinhardt and Richard Artschwager, Blinky Palermo, Robert Ryman, Jo Baer, Robert Barry etc., who have also made important contributions to the story of the frame in our century. (The story of how the frame came into being and how it was lost is long and complex. Although it is only possible in this article to refer back historically to the idea of the frame to a very limited extent, and no claim can be made to presenting a linear development story, some key positions should nevertheless be mentioned: specific works by Giulio Paolini dating from the 60s function as important pioneers that provided aesthetic solutions on this subject. More recent positions, whose work presents transformations of the frame in terms of its own value or its illustrative value include Imi Knoebel, Georg Herold or Christian Eckart. (The first of Modernism's crucial innovations was not relating the frame to the picture but to the space, as the frame itself is the autonomous pictorial work, and secondly not to define the frame as having art inherent in it, but to define it through the context, the general, or 'framing', conditions. Thus the rejection of representational quality acquires a new function. No landscapes or people are portrayed, as in the (131)

case of a frame without a picture – in contrast to the picture without a frame – this would also not be possible at all. But instead the frame itself is the picture or the sculpture. The external reference of representational painting, the internal reference of expressive abstraction, the self-reference of the material image were replaced by spatial reference. The square of the frame is a structure made up of four elements, a quadruple. This quadruple defines itself, but also the space, in that it occupies it. Miller has detached this function of the frame from the picture in the most consistent way, and defined it as a sculptural element of space, Miller's frames are space-objects on the wall or on the floor. The frame no longer encloses a surface, the surface of a picture, but – surrounded by space – it punctures space. Miller has thought the Minimalist legacy to a conclusion in his precise, reversible function between image and object, between surface and space. His re-framing is effectively a re-framing of Donald Judd's stacks (boxes piled up against a wall), similarly to the way in which John Armleder took over the legacy of Rodchenko as neo-avant-garde. It is no co-incidence that Miller has exhibited with both John Armleder and Pietro Sanguineti, as all three artists share the quality of updating the products of the avant-garde, from hard:edge via shaped canvas to minimal sculpture. (Art in the historical sense does not start until frame design takes on art's formal problems, especially the problem of its surroundings. The picture achieved primacy in abstract painting in the first half of the twentieth century because of two-dimensional pictorial order. It was only this primacy that made its negation possible. The loss of the picture in the pictureless frame is only the negative dialectic of coloured surface primacy. While this loss was being prepared, the wall had already become part of the picture. The picture (field) was no longer clearly distinguishable from the wall, its surrounding area. This meant that frame and space entered into a new relationship that was not illusionistic or representational. The frame no longer encloses a picture, but the space. Picture area and surrounding area are variables in a new equation. The removal of borders between picture area and surrounding area, aspired to so many times in art history, has reached perfection, even though the picture is the price of that loss. The negative pictures that consist only of fragmentary frames have made the 'picture' into a form that opens into the infinite. The border between picture area and surrounding area is indistinct and open. (These frame pictures are organized purely spatially, and relate to the space around them. As heirs of Minimalism, they are completely counter-illusionistic and counter-representational. The frame is no longer décor for a picture, but an autonomous object that accentuates and articulates the space. It becomes a spatial element. The wall surface replaces the pictorial surface. Pictorial space becomes real space. The frame changes from a decorative element to an autonomous structure, from an instrument of pictorial creation and construction to an instrument of wall construction and space creation. And as a result of this the frame changes from an external to an internal form. It no longer borders, it removes borders. The form enclosing a picture, which also defines the internal composition, itself forms an external composition within the wall surfaces that surround it. The frames

[132]

that normally frame a picture now need frames themselves again. The frame is a display system for the picture, and yet the frame needs a display system as well. The emancipation of the frame means that the display system of the frame itself is revalued. All the frame's support elements, in other words auxiliary elements of the frame itself, are displayed as autonomous art objects. (In an influential exhibition dating from 1966, *Systemic Painting* at the Guggenheim Museum, showing minimalist painting in which the actions and gestures of abstract painting are replaced by the system, Jo Baer appeared alongside Agnes Martin, Larry Poons, Robert Mangold and Dorothea Rockburne; Baer's work was particularly striking. To emphasize the object nature of the paintings, these were provided with massive, three-dimensional frames with the canvas stretched over them. Jo Baer only paints the vertical corners, or even only the flanks of the picture. Perception is shifted in this game with treatment and colour, physical presence and illusion, object and painting. The ambiguity existing between picture and object in pure two-dimensional painting becomes obvious. The art of painting, played up to the bounds, to the very edge of what is possible, now really does happen on the edge, at the corner: mechanically, rather than gesturally, fabricated, and not expressive. Reduction to the corners and edges emphasized the dialectic of the painted object. The barren waste of the white surface is confined and at the same time extended by the corner-painting. Painting as a purely random phenomenon transforms the picture into its own mimesis: an object and its shadow, visible and strangely absent. „The painting is an object, but that object is not identical with what is actually confined within its bounds. I have always had the feeling, that an object is larger than its outline, that it has a field of force beyond itself.“³ Jo Baer's 60s paintings, like Sam Francis's *Edge Paintings* (1966–68) released, emptied and liberated the surface of the panel picture, and thus defined themselves as wall objects for the first time. Robert Ryman was able to pick up at this point by declaring that the surface of the wall was part of the picture. He drew an increasingly thin line between the edge of the panel picture and the wall, which meant that the paintings would not make sense without the wall. The wall itself became a picture and thus the wall was relieved of its support function, of its subordination as a mere support system for painting. Thus we can establish in the development of an absolute art that painting has completely lost the picture, and that the emancipated frame and the liberated wall have taken the place of the picture. The frame as an object and the wall as a picture are the last stages in a chain of liberating acts: after the liberation and achievement of independence of colour, form and surface, frame and wall have now liberated themselves as well. Miller's works are in this tradition of radical Modernism, which was centred on the problem of the surface. By exposing the surface itself and referring to the wall as the last surface, he not only reaches the limits of geometrical abstraction and of minimalist sculpture, but of Modernism itself.

¹ John Berger, *Das Sichtbare & das Verborgene*, Munich/Vienna 1990, p.229. ² Cf. Christa Steinle, *Der Kontrakt des Künstlers mit der Neuen Galerie. Eine Rahmengeschichte*, in: cat. Peter Weibel, *Malerei zwischen Anarchie und Forschung*, Graz 1992. ³ Jo Baer, cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y. 1975.

[133]