

# STEPHEN BRAM

13 JUNE – 12 JULY 2014

200  
GERTRAUDE  
STREET

1.

All of the artwork produced by Stephen Bram since 1987, whether in paint, sculpture, film or fluorescent light, has been determined by the same logic. Nominating two or three points (usually outside the bounds of the given work), Bram draws lines across the canvas or construction plan towards these points, using the outlines created to determine the forms within the work. The points towards which the lines are directed operate as perspectival vanishing points; depending on the specific properties of a given work (such as the distance of the vanishing points from the object) this creates varying degrees of illusory spatial recession, from an almost imperceptible sense of depth in some works to a nearly naturalistic space in others that causes them to appear simultaneously, as Bram has noted, as both abstract paintings and depictions of buildings.<sup>1</sup>

The colourful geometric surfaces of Bram's paintings and their initial appearance within the context of the Store 5 group and exhibitions of 'young lovers of modern abstraction'<sup>2</sup> have encouraged the understanding of his work as a whole in terms of the tradition of modernist abstraction. Even a cursory examination of his work, however, leads one to question its place within the mainstream of modernist abstract painting. Judged by the standards of formalist criticism as they are articulated most fully in the writings of Greenberg and Fried, his work undoubtedly fails. First, and most obviously, in adopting the convention of perspective, Bram does not attempt to suppress or otherwise move away from the illusion

of physical space; the overcoming of such space in favour of an 'optical' depth specific to the medium of painting appears in formalist criticism as one of the primary tendencies motivating the development of abstract art throughout the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, by locating the vanishing points outside the work itself, Bram's works necessarily appear as fragments of a larger whole: looking at his paintings with an understanding of their perspectival structure, one mentally extends the lines present on the canvas until they reach their vanishing points outside it.<sup>4</sup> This implied extension beyond the canvas is clearly opposed to the compositional logic of medium-specific modernist painting, the deductive structure whereby the specific shape of the support determines the formal qualities of the painting: as Michael Fried argues, the appearance 'as if the painting were a rectangular cut into a large visual field' is antithetical to the attempt to solve the formal problem of 'finding a self-aware and strictly logical relation between the painted image and the framing edge'.<sup>5</sup>

If this 'failure' should indicate to us that Bram's work does not straightforwardly participate in the mainstream development of twentieth-century abstraction into medium-specific formalism, it is equally true that there is nothing within his work or his statements regarding it to suggest that this 'failure' should be seen as a deliberate provocation along the lines of the knowing adoption of 'degraded' forms of abstraction (stemming from popular culture

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<sup>3</sup> The classic account of this development is Michael Fried, 'Three American Painters' (1965), reprinted in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 213–265.

<sup>4</sup> See Stephen Bram, 'Notes on Images Constructed in Two Point Perspective', in *Stephen Bram* (Deakin, 1992), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Fried, 'New York Letter: Noland, Thiebaud' in *Art and Objecthood*, pp. 297 and 'New York Letter: Oliitski, Jenkins, Thiebaud, Twombly', *Art and Objecthood*, p. 320.

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<sup>1</sup> Bram, cited in Thomas Janzen, 'Abstraction of the Concrete: A Few Geometric Observations on the Work of Stephen Bram' in *Stephen Bram: Oberföhringer Straße 156* (Collage: Munich, 2001), p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Pascal, 'Introduction' in *Stephen Bram* (Melbourne: Deakin University Gallery, 1992), p. 5.

and Op-Art) found in ironic movements such as Neo-Geo. These (still present but increasingly tired) investigations of modernism often take the form of asserting a representational or thematic content (architectural, economic, racial) within abstract works, usually with the intent of exposing the ideological determination of the seeming neutrality of abstract art. These critics of the ideological assumptions of modernism deny the very possibility of abstraction, of freedom from specific reference. Bram's work, on the other hand, is both distant from the assumptions of medium-specific modernism and free of any specific representational content. In his work, as in Cubism's uncoupling of the techniques of naturalistic representation (such as chiaroscuro and modeling) from their representational function, perspective (which, as James Elkins has noted, is, consciously or not, central to our concept of naturalistic representation)<sup>6</sup> is no longer used to represent any particular or even physically possible space, but is rather itself displayed. Bram deliberately situates his work at this point of indeterminacy between the mute materiality of the abstract object and the ability to read it within a signifying system: as he has written, the 'renunciation of any specific reference' within his work does not mean that it is 'about nothing', but rather that it is 'directed to the (otherwise inaccessible) phenomena of meaning, and the processes of its attribution, themselves'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that, in his argument, the practice of perspective in what is usually considered its Renaissance high-point is in fact marked by 'unnaturalistic formal concerns'. See James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 11, 145.

<sup>7</sup> Bram, untitled artist's statement in catalogue for the exhibition *Stephen Bram*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, 12 November – 19 December 2009, n.p.

## 2.

Despite the relatively uniform visual appearance of Bram's work, the unity that obtains among his work in different media is not primarily stylistic, but conceptual. Just as the angles of the lines and the shapes they form in his paintings and drawings are not determined by the shape of the canvas or paper but by vanishing points outside the work, in his constructed environments, such as *200 Gertrude Street*, it is not primarily the existing architecture but rather three external vanishing points that determine the range of possible placements and angles of the new walls built into the space. In this way, Bram's 'specialised project' presents a solution to the problem of compositional arbitrariness that haunts all non-representational art.<sup>8</sup> Although room still exists for formal and compositional decisions to be made within the reduced range of possibilities presented by Bram's system (a fact attested to by the formal variety found in his work), his work tends towards the same avoidance of 'caprice, taste and other whimsies' that LeWitt used to characterise conceptual art: the 'idea becomes a machine that makes the art'.<sup>9</sup>

Bram's close friend Mutlu Çerkez unified his entire body of work through assigning to every work a second date on which he planned to remake it. He thus predetermined his production in advance, cutting it off from historical contingency. Bram is similarly attracted to the monomaniacal aspect of his vanishing point system: his first solo exhibition at Anna

<sup>8</sup> Bram, untitled artist's statement, n.p. Some interesting comments regarding the problem of arbitrariness and various strategies developed to avoid it in twentieth-century abstract painting can be found in Yve-Alain Bois, 'Kelly's Trouvailles: Findings in France' in *Ellsworth Kelly: The Early Drawings, 1948-1955* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museum, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> See Sol LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10, 1967.

Schwartz's City Gallery in 1988 consisted of a series of almost identical paintings. But this internal consistency, in which the initial idea is 'followed absolutely and logically',<sup>10</sup> is not the sole content of Bram's vanishing point concept. In fact, and paradoxically considering the hermetic enclosure implied by such a rigorous and unyielding realisation of a single concept, the primary appeal of the vanishing point system for Bram lies in the relationship it poses between the work and the world outside. The very structure of the work is determined by points standing outside of it, and to view it is to trace its lines beyond the limits of the canvas to a point within the space in which it is seen. Bram's work thus acts as a 'pointing finger'<sup>11</sup> to the space it shares 'with the people that might look' at it;<sup>12</sup> it points beyond itself in a sort of ostensive demonstration of the space it shares with the viewer.

It is thus unsurprising that Bram has mentioned his interest in the work of Daniel Buren,<sup>13</sup> but the differences between their respective projects are instructive. Like Bram's, Buren's work attempts to 'include its own context',<sup>14</sup> but it does so in a different register. Buren's site-specific arrangements of his trademark striped fabric (which he refers to as a 'visual tool') are derived from specific characteristics of their exhibitions site, and are intended to expose and critique these characteristics.<sup>15</sup> His contribution to *Documenta 5* (1972), for example, consisted of exhibiting his stripes both as an independent 'painting'

and as a wallpaper spread throughout the various rooms of the exhibition, ignoring the curatorial distinctions made between its various sections as a way of exposing and protesting what he saw as an illegitimate subordination of individual artworks to the exhibition's curatorial scheme. Buren's work also points a finger at the world outside, but it does so (at least in theory) with reference to the specific nature of its exhibition site; Bram's reference to the world outside is deliberately empty of content. Where Buren's project is invested in its site-specific nature, the reference to the world outside that is intrinsic to Bram's work is not tied to any site, because the same relation between the work and the determining geometric points outside it persists no matter where the work is located. In this way, Bram manages to insist on a 'very specific but nonetheless real' connection between his work and the space in which it is seen<sup>16</sup> while his commitment to the institutional-critical element often associated with such insistent contextualisation remains entirely (and fascinatingly) ambiguous.

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10 LeWitt, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art'.

11 Bram, untitled artist's statement in catalogue for the exhibition *Stephen Bram*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, 12 November – 19 December 2009, n.p.

12 Bram, 'Stephen Bram interviewed by Sue Cramer', in *Stephen Bram: Oberföhringer Straße 156*, p. 37.

13 Bram, 'Stephen Bram interviewed by Sue Cramer', p. 30.

14 Guy Lelong, *Daniel Buren*, trans. David Radzinowicz (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), p. 58.

15 See Lelong, *Daniel Buren*, p. 40.

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16 Bram, 'Stephen Bram interviewed by Sue Cramer', p. 37.

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Where Bram's paintings and drawings point to the exhibition space they inhabit, the series of sculpted environments he has created since 1995 develop this central logic of his work by transforming the exhibition venue itself into the work of art exhibited.<sup>17</sup> In these works, three vanishing points are used to determine firstly a new floor plan for the space, realised through building temporary walls, and secondly the slope of these new walls. Through their use of perspectival techniques, Bram's paintings indulge the immersive pleasure the eye takes in moving through an imaginary space. His constructed environments, on the one hand, offer no such 'windows'; rather, as with minimalist sculpture, these works can only be properly experienced by physically moving around within them, allowing various visual configurations made by the oddly angled walls (and the shadows they cast) to form and disperse themselves as one moves from viewpoint to viewpoint. Standing in the middle of one of *200 Gertrude Street's* irregular corridors, the effect of the slanted walls is immediately and disconcertingly physical, producing an uneasy sensation as if the ground were moving slightly under one's feet.

In other respects these works are entirely foreign to minimalism. The success of the minimalist artwork depends on the fact that its regular gestalt form reveals nothing upon close inspection and offers no material for a symbolic or expressionistic interpretation. Only this evacuation of all content suggestive of an experience of the sculpture as anything other than a physical object in the viewer's space makes possible the desired self-reflective experience of oneself as a body in physical space shared with the sculpture.

A viewer of *200 Gertrude Street* who understands the principle behind its construction, on the other hand, will be aware of an element of the work that exceeds and supplements its physical experience. We know that this space was designed not with our physical experience of it as the primary concern (as is resolutely the case with a minimalist sculpture), but rather in relation to immaterial vanishing points outside the building. And we know that the relationship between the constructed space and these vanishing points is only completely intelligible in the work's plan, not in the physical building itself. In this way, the space of *200 Gertrude Street* is 'meaningful' in a way that is entirely antithetical to minimalism. Thus, despite the seeming absence of the representational technique that marks Bram's paintings, his constructed works do not resolve the dialectic of materiality and meaning present in the paintings. For, inside *200 Gertrude Street* we are aware that, at the same time as being inside a physical (and institutional) space, we are also inside a drawing, inside a space determined by the demands of a two-dimensional line as much as by considerations of its eventual three-dimensional existence.<sup>18</sup>

Before his death in 1933, Raymond Roussel left a manuscript with his publisher to be published posthumously. Titled 'How I Wrote Certain of My Books', it describes some varieties of the 'very special method' he used to write his major works of narrative fiction and two of his plays.<sup>19</sup> The method consists in the exploitation of the phonetic similarities

<sup>18</sup> As Bram has noted, 'This is because they are conceived and built in three dimensions using the same, familiar, simple techniques by which rectangular architectural space is usually depicted in two dimensions.' Stephen Bram interviewed by Sue Cramer', p. 34

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Roussel, 'How I Wrote Certain of My Books' in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books and Other Writings*, ed. Trevor Winkfield (Cambridge, Mass.: Exact Change, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Including *6 Penny Lane* (1995), *Oberföhringer Straße 156* (2001), *Level 3, E29* (2013) and now *200 Gertrude Street* (2014).

between words to generate the details of fictional narratives. In the most advanced version of his method, Roussel chose existing phrases, such as the name and address of his shoemaker or a line from a Victor Hugo poem, and distorted them into meaningless but phonetically similar strings of words. Taking the historical designation 'Napoléon première empereur', for example, he deformed its constituent parts into the series 'Nappe ollé ombre miettes hampe air heure' (tablecloth olé shadow crumbs pole wind time). In *Impressions of Africa* (1910), he uses this series to generate the fleeting images the sculptor Fuxier conjures by throwing his special 'lozenges' into water: 'the Spanish dancers mounted on the table and the shadows cast by crumbs visible on the table-cloth — followed by the wind-clock in the land of Cockaigne'.<sup>20</sup>

Roussel's method of composition casts a strange, destabilising light on his texts, as one cannot help but feel that his books are only the surface appearance of a process that is itself inaccessible and foreign to the transparent prose of his narratives. As John Ashbery has noted, what Roussel 'leaves us with is a work that is like the perfectly preserved temple of a cult which has disappeared without a trace, or a complicated set of tools whose use cannot be discovered'.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, viewing *200 Gertrude Street* without the plan of its construction on hand, we sense that a specific logic determines its construction and intuit a dimension that exceeds the physical experience it immediately presents to us, yet we cannot entirely reconstruct this logic. As Bram himself has noted, even for a viewer entirely uninformed about the compositional

logic of these constructed spaces, they do not 'seem arbitrary':<sup>22</sup> we sense that something other than the whim of the artist is responsible for the space that encloses us. But, in a sense, the principle behind these constructions remains inaccessible to the experience of even the most well informed viewer, as the literal opacity of the walls means that no one can actually follow the work's angles to their vanishing points outside the building. (This inaccessibility is particularly pronounced in *200 Gertrude Street* because two of its vanishing points are below ground level).

Bram's interest in the idea of a determinative logic that cannot be gleaned from a work's surface is perhaps clearest in a set of paintings he has composed using the same vanishing points previously used to determine constructed works. A series of paintings using the relationship between the three vanishing points of the *Oberförhringer Straße 156* project are particularly noteworthy in this regard because their surface appears as merely an elegant design of crisscrossing lines. These works present us with a double obscurity: first, their surfaces tell us nothing about the reference they contain to the other piece with which they share their vanishing points, and secondly, because the sense of spatial recession leading to a vanishing point outside the canvas is almost absent, the reference they make to the space outside them is obscured.

In these works, the reference to the vanishing point outside the work is simultaneously a reference to another work 'inside' Bram's oeuvre. This self-referential element is not confined to the small part of Bram's production that reuses specific configurations of vanishing points. All of his work

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<sup>20</sup> Roussel, 'How I Wrote Certain of My Books', p. 13. For this episode, see Raymond Roussel, *Impressions of Africa*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011), pp. 82–84.

<sup>21</sup> John Ashbery, 'Introduction' in Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, xxxii.

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<sup>22</sup> Bram, 'Stephen Bram interviewed by Sue Cramer', p. 34.

points outside itself not to any specific world but to vanishing points, Cartesian points that are empty of qualitative specificity and entirely interchangeable. The points outside themselves to which all of his works gesture are, in a sense, identical; every 'specific but nonetheless real' reference his work makes to the space outside it is also an exact repetition of the gesture he has performed ceaselessly since 1987, immune to the influence of context and contingency. In this way, every reference to a vanishing point in Bram's work is also a self-reference. In this logic we can begin to grasp some of the complexity of Bram's paradoxical and idiosyncratic project, which suspends itself between reliance on the world outside and hermetic self-enclosure.

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200 GERTRUDE STREET

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Stephen Bram

*200 Gertrude Street*, 2014

installation

Photo credit: Jeremy Dillon

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