

Boundaries

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Art consists of limitation. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame.

—G.K. Chesterton

There is something naked about an unframed piece of art. Even if the work is beautiful, stunning, and otherwise complete, it somehow fails to connect with us without its frame. One can spend almost as much money on a frame as one does for a cheap print. Without frames, prints sit coiled in their tubes, waiting to be placed within golden boundaries. We often seem to regard art with an innate sense that it is different from the rest of the world, a sense that it must be separated from the world around it. The frame is there to remind us of limits, to call us inside it.

It was on a walk down West Fourth on the way to the High Line Elevated Park that I noticed a stained glass window. It looked like stained glass windows often do: an ornate, beautiful decoration featuring panes of all different sizes and shapes pieced together, forming an abstract, multi-colored design. These windows straddle a line between architecture and art, utility and expression, the world as we live in it and art that frames it. This line of distinction is often invisible and subjective. One must decide on an individual basis which side of the line a particular window falls. A large window depicting the resurrection of Christ can be more than just an architectural flourish in an old church. Conversely, this small window on West Fourth seems nothing more than a decoration.

But Spencer Finch's *The River That Flows Both Ways*, located in the tunnel that covers the High Line from 15th to 16th Street, wants to be more than just decoration. Panes of stained glass are grouped together into a series of evenly spaced windows, each window divided into three sections. Depending on the time of day, the light reflected from the river will come through the windows in a different way, producing different colors. The windows are supposed to capture and represent the many faces of the mighty

Hudson, a waterway that was once economically and industrially integral to New York but now exists only in the back of our collective mind as decoration.

Unlike the window on West Fourth, *The River* was intended to be viewed as art. But take a look at its so-called audience trudging through the tunnel, and you would assume that the windows were nothing more than an aesthetically pleasing architectural flourish. People walk past them without a second glance, assuming that the real riches lie on the other side of the tunnel and not within it; some stop at the plaque to read about the piece; others look across the small chasm between the main path and the wall that holds *The River*, only to keep on walking.

The River fails to capture their attention, in part because Finch chose to integrate his piece into its surroundings. In her essay “Sittings of Public Art: Integration versus Intervention,” Miwon Kwon wonders whether a piece of public art should abandon “its distinctive look of ‘art’ to seamlessly assimilate into the site,” or should instead interrupt the space, intervene in the coherence of the locale to assert its meaning (72). *The River* seems like it would fall into the integration camp. Nothing about the space proclaims *The River* to be art; all evidence points toward its status as architecture. There is nothing gallery-like about this tunnel: it is quiet, grungy, badly lit, and resoundingly empty, and its accoutrements—prosaic chairs and tables—give the space a commercial feel. Kwon tells us that the integrationists believe that “the more an art work disappear[s] into the site . . . by mimicking familiar architectural elements . . . , the greater its social value” (69). *The River*, however, reveals the major risk of this mimicry: the chance that the piece and its meaning will be lost in the architecture it seeks to mimic.

The High Line itself—a re-purposed piece of architecture, a railroad reborn as a public park—refuses such integration. It is a piece of history, antiquated and obsolete, that has been salvaged and transformed into something both old and new. In his essay “Hybrid Place: The Experience of the Local and Remote,” Andrew Blum conceives of a kind of place that is both local and influenced by a variety of remote stimuli, including the internet, television, and news media—a place that “draws its meaning from a personal combination of your immediate surroundings and the elements of the faraway with which you are somehow in touch” (15). The High Line seems like one of these hybrid places, given meaning by the physical presence of history. One can still see the train tracks weaving through the concrete floor. The dilapidated brick buildings that border the path and the plants that poke through the concrete give off the aesthetic of a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Yet the

park is still an overwhelmingly modern place, with modern touches: a short glass wall that keeps people from falling off the edge, well-designed reclining wooden benches for two, and the new buildings that appear to be made purely out of windows, shooting up around the park. Here, the past and the future of this neighborhood—and of the city itself—mash together, and this interesting synergy is precisely what *The River* lacks.

While many places in the city seem to be caught between two eras, the High Line adds another layer of idiosyncrasy: height. It is an open-air park that seems to float two to three stories above the street. It weaves in and out of buildings, cutting across blocks, existing in defiance of the traffic and architecture around it. It is an anomaly, bearing not only the remnants of another time but the lifestyle of another place. It offers a unique way to experience the city around you.

These two levels of disjunction might be the key to explaining the strange behavior I noticed on the High Line: for some reason, the park seems to turn the average New Yorker into a tourist. Living in one of the most architecturally and demographically diverse cities in the world, New Yorkers like to appear nonplussed about their surroundings, while sneering at non-natives who marvel at Manhattan's many wonders. But on the High Line, New Yorkers stop and point, tell their companions that a building is their favorite, and become engaged in the cityscape. Even the most mundane buildings suddenly become more exciting, more interesting, or simply just worth looking at. In a way, the High Line, a repurposed piece of architecture, repurposes the architecture around it. It functions as a frame, disconnects us from time and space, making the city itself interesting.

I believe art thrives within this disconnection. In his essay "The *Panorama Mesdag*," Mark Doty describes the *Panorama* as a frameless painting of the sea that surrounds you, envelops you, and creates the illusion that "the 'world' around you is a work of art, and you are at its center" (215). *Panorama Mesdag*, however, is not a typical work of art. "We're used to art held in its place," Doty says, "separated from the world by a golden boundary that enhances and imprisons it" (216). It appears on the surface that *The River* matches this definition of a typical piece. It is disconnected from the world by its own golden boundaries: the bricks that frame it and the chasm that separates it from the main path. Though *The River* is still integrated into the tunnel, the piece is also separated from it; subtle boundaries keep it disconnected. As Doty describes a small Fabritius painting, an example of a framed artwork, his words feel like they could be describing Finch's collection of windows: "It occupies only its own space, contained, in some way indifferent to us. There

it is, whether you look at it or not” (216). While the plaque will tell you that *The River* is asking us to contemplate water, its colors, and the Hudson River, it does not seem to care if you even notice it. The river itself, in contrast, demands our attention: it is part of the panorama of the city, which “surrounds you, envelops you” (215).

Doty describes *Panorama Mesdag* as “wish[ing] to colonize your attention for a while, while time seems held in suspension” (217). This aptly describes the High Line, too, except instead of a painting, it is the city that gets your attention, *demand*s your attention. On the High Line, you are allowed to stand and gawk at the architecture. In the streets, you would be a tourist, but on the High Line, you are an observer. This observation is different from seeing; it requires the kind of disconnection that the High Line creates. It requires taking a step back and contemplating the meaning of the thing you see.

This meaning is of a higher nature than the visceral meaning of space Andrew Blum discusses. Art makes us question our lives and our surroundings—it requires both a disconnection from our surroundings and an observation of them. Space, on the other hand, holds meaning in its purpose, its answers. Home, for example, is something we understand: its purpose is to house and comfort. A dark alley, while understood to be unsafe, is, at least, understood. Art, conversely, forces us to ask questions and gives us mere hints of answers, answers that we have to find deep within ourselves.

We can see the difference between these two kinds of meaning in Richard Galpin’s public art piece, *Viewing Station*, also installed on the High Line. Each person wishing to experience *Viewing Station* must individually look through a small viewing apparatus that places the eyes at just the right level and angle to look at a large sheet of metal. This sheet of metal has been cut up; small geometric shapes let the viewer see the skyline behind the metal. While looking through the *Viewing Station*, viewers see an altered and abstract Manhattan skyline composed of triangles, rectangles, and other varied shapes. As the High Line website states, “Galpin’s artwork will offer a novel reconsideration of our surroundings” (“Richard Galpin”). It is this reconsideration, also labeled as observation, that separates our previous ideas of what Manhattan means viscerally and what Manhattan could mean to us through the lens of the artwork.

Viewing Station captures our attention in ways that *The River* doesn’t. But why? The answer lies, perhaps, in Doty’s distinction between framed and unframed. He compares and contrasts the Fabritius painting with *Panorama Mesdag*, considering the former a perfect example of art separated from the

world and the latter a perfect example of art trying to *be* the world. Doty has nothing but good things to say about the painting, but he describes the *Panorama* as “a parable . . . on what art might and might not achieve” (213). The *Panorama* is unframed, all-encompassing. It attempts to create its own world—something strikingly different from merely being separated from the world by a frame. In a way, then, *Panorama Mesdag* is less art and more space; it has more in common with staring at *The River* than observing the skyline through *Viewing Station*.

Perhaps the problem with *The River* and the *Panorama* is that they are unframed pieces. As Doty exclaims, “How unpressurized art is without its frame! This big, encompassing gesture fails to move” (216). Whether or not an art piece is framed can make all the difference in whether or not we glean any meaning from it. In fact, the framed object doesn’t need to *be* art for the human mind to try to extract meaning. Take, for example, the 10th Avenue Square, a theater built into the High Line. As you enter, you walk down a series of descending benches until you reach the stage. But the stage is small, barely large enough for a person to stand on. Luckily, this stage is not built for action. Instead, a series of windows allows the assembled audience to watch the people and the cars on 10th Avenue. Watching the traffic below, you get a sense that there is a meaning behind all of this—a lesson to be learned. But it isn’t art that you’re watching; it’s just life—and we want to interpret it *because* it is framed. If you watched the traffic from anywhere else on the High Line, you would be disconnectedly observing. But for the viewer to make the leap from observation to interpretation, and thus to higher meaning, the art must have a frame. Doty describes feeling underwhelmed by *Panorama Mesdag* because it wasn’t “an art of intimacy, of privacy, of emotional urgency and connection” (217). It seems, then, that one must create a framed piece of art in an unframed world to create a sense of emotional connection; one must first be disconnected to be reconnected.

And yet, this kind of framing is not all that a work of art needs to mean. The work must also ask us questions, and give us hints as to the answers. It is a fragile balance: some pieces of art have too many answers, hitting us over the head with their meaning like an after-school special, while some pieces of art have no answers at all, like *The River*. Up to the point of sense-making, Finch’s piece does everything right. It creates a sense of disconnection despite its integration into the surrounding architecture, giving us the ability to observe from a distance. It frames what it asks us to look at, demanding that we *interpret*. In some ways, it demands that we contemplate water itself, that we throw our own memories and feelings about water onto its glass canvas.

But then what? The problem is there are no hints as to where we are supposed to go once we start the contemplation. There is no point of reconnection; no reason to connect.

Perhaps, then, art does not just need to have a frame, but actually *be* a frame. If art asks us to fill it with our own thoughts, our own meaning, perhaps it is truly nothing more than a finely constructed framework of questions that guides our observations toward answers, toward meaning. This is not, of course, a literal frame like the golden boundaries that so often separate art from the world. It is, instead, an abstract framework, both highly structured and loose enough that it feels genuine, not contrived. *The River* does not have this inner framework. It allows our thoughts to float around with no focus. It is like observing the city on the High Line—what we see may be pretty, but where’s the meaning? Because *The River* fails to move us, all of the work it has done to disconnect us, to make us observe, is for naught. All chance at meaning is lost. The work becomes a part of unframed space, a mere decoration on the side of a tunnel. In the end, it is nothing more than another stained glass window, no more meaningful than the window on West Fourth.

There is something naked about a frameless work of art. We need a partition, a golden boundary, to distinguish art from the world. We need it to know what we are meant to understand. But a literal frame is not enough: the work requires an inner, abstract framework as well, a structure that allows for understanding. Art evokes a delicate process in the mind of the observer; the response is never orderly. No formulae, no rules can dictate the exact relationship between art and frame and observer. But the piece must call for interpretation—for an ordering, a framing, of all that it suggests—before it can declare itself art.

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