View from a Window (Remix)

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Introduction

Let me start with a list of the principal reference works I consulted in organizing this exhibition. The original date of publication is given in parentheses.[1]

Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura* (1436)
Water Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935, original German edition)
Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1965)
Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria" (1972)
Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (1979)
Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids" (1979)
Victor Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting* (1997)
Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (2006)

All of these texts are well known to scholars of art since the 20th century.

In the Italian Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti's 1436 book *De Pictura*, he compares painting to an open window that provides the viewer with a scene beyond the rectangular frame. This list of famous texts shows that even in 20th century art, which emerged some 500 years after Alberti, windows have endured as an important latent theme.

The present book, consisting of 14 chapters, deals with a variety of themes related to windows in connection with art and architecture. As the commentaries in each chapter are based on individual works, a number of related themes are dispersed throughout the volume. While on the one hand designed to supplement some of these commentaries, especially those dealing with art, this essay is also intended to consolidate and reiterate a variety of themes. In effect, it is an attempt to take another look at the scenes that are visible through the window from a slightly different perspective.

The Window and Perspective

1.

First, I would return to a famous line from Alberti's text:

"First of all, on the surface which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of what-

ever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen."[2]

This passage contains two important points. The first is the matter of the rectangular frame. And the second is the question of what kind of scene Alberti actually tried to see through this frame.

Let me start with the second point first. After the section quoted above, Alberti writes at great length about how to create a one-point perspective picture. The discussion might summed up as follows (fig. 1):
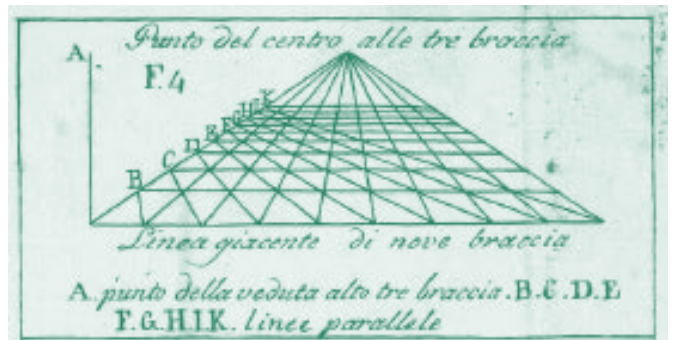

fig. 1.
One-point perspective diagram from the 1804 Italian edition of Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura*. Source: http://www.archive.org/details/dellapitturaedel00albe (accessed October 5, 2019).

1. Draw a rectangular frame.
2. Draw a human figure as large as you like, and divide its body into three equal parts. Each part shall be equal to one braccio, a unit of length.
3. Divide the base of the rectangle into braccia.
4. Determine the center point in the rectangle. It is best to make it somewhat lower than the figure's head. The central point will hereafter serve as eye level for both the painter and the viewer.
5. Draw lines from the marks you made at the base of the rectangle to the center.
6. Draw lines from the figure's eye level to the marks at the base of the rectangle.
7. At the points where the diagonal lines from the figure's eyes cross the lines extending from the center, draw parallel lines to the base. Using this technique, you will be able to accurately depict things such as the shrinking aspect of floor tiles as they recede into the horizon.

In other words, Alberti's well-known quote is the beginning of a detailed explanation of how to make one-point perspective that would have been of practical use to

painters. What Alberti set out to establish was not some vague scene outside the window, but rather an extremely abstract world, which emerged by drawing something based on a set of geometrical rules.

Further, the subject that should be depicted within this rectangular window is not merely a beautiful mountain or the sea, or a row of houses or human figures. Echoing the 17th-century painter Nicolas Poussin, the French art-historian Louis Marin argued that using the borders and edges of a frame to detach a picture from adjacent objects turned it into something that merited attention.[3] In other words, the subject depicted there had to be something worth gazing at – for example, a historical event or a scene from the Bible or mythology, which occupied a high position in the European painting system.

2.

It is a well-known historical fact that long after this period, between the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, that a succession of painters emerged who set out to destroy the world of one-point perspective, which placed special value on geometry and a subject worth gazing at. These included the Nabis, Paul Gauguin, and Paul Cézanne; and Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, the originators of Cubism. They went about this in various ways. The Nabis and Gauguin, for instance, approached painting as a flat plane containing a collection of colors. Cézanne and the Cubists, meanwhile, endeavored to change from a one-point perspective, an outgrowth of the viewer's immobile eye, to a multiple perspective, which considered the subject from many angles. They also changed their subject matter, dealing with ordinary and fragmented things in a snapshot-like approach that captured scenes from daily life such as a bustling street or a railroad station.

In this book, we locate Henri Matisse within this tendency to reexamine one-point perspective. In a quote that also appears in "3. Windows in 20th Century Art I," the artist made the following comment about windows and the scenes that extend outside of them:

"Probably from the fact that for me the space is one unity from the horizon right to the interior of my work room, and that the boat that is going past exists in the same space as the familiar objects around me; and the wall with the window does not create two different worlds."[4]

In two examples of Matisse's work from the 1920s that are included in this ex-

hibition, *Woman by a Window* (p. 44) and *Waiting* (p. 45), he depicts the perspective in a relatively straightforward manner, making it somewhat difficult to understand the sentiment behind these words. It is perhaps better to refer to a work like *The Red Room* (1908, Hermitage Museum, fig. 2).

fig.2 Henri Matisse, *The Red Room* (1908), Hermitage Museum.

In this painting, a woman is arranging some fruit and dishes on a table. There is a window in the upper left through which we can see a meadow, a house, and some trees. The tablecloth in the foreground and the wallpaper in the background are made up of the same arabesque and flower-basket pattern on a red ground. This cancels out any disparity between the front and the back, and causes everything to blend together. In addition, although the chairs on either side of the table should create different scales in proportion to the width of the table, they are almost the same size. Which is to say that the room is equipped with a variety of devices designed to neutralize perspective. That being so, what is the connection between the room and the scene outside the window? The line of yellow fruit on the table that starts from the woman's hand bears a close resemblance to the row of yellow flowers blooming in the meadow. And the middle of the three trees outside has looks very similar to the shape of the woman's head, with her hair piled up in a bun. At times, the landscape outside looks as if it is receding into the rear of the space. But other times, it looks as if it is being elevated by the similar colors and forms, and surging up to the level of the room. Ultimately, it is hard to decide whether this rectangular outline represents a window that presents us with a world extending deep into the beyond, or a frame that presents us with a two-dimensional painting hanging on the wall. This is a concrete

example of Matisse's technique of encompassing "two different worlds" in a single picture plane.

3.

In the 1910s, Piet Mondrian, Vasily Kandinsky, and some of Matisse's other European contemporaries began exploring abstract painting without including any concrete subjects from the outside world. In time, this approach also came to be used in the U.S. by artists who had escaped the Nazi regime in Europe (these included Mondrian and Josef Albers, whose work also appears in this exhibition; pp. 60–63). After World War II, this trend developed into Abstract Expressionism (see "4. Windows in 20th Century Art II").

As this happened, the rectangular frame, the first point in Alberti's text, once again became an issue. This was due to the fact that the frame, the border between inside and outside, became a battlefield where the picture plane in an abstract painting attempted to create a world all its own by shutting out any outside subject matter. In using the window as a metaphor, the overriding concern became what was visible inside the frame. This suddenly seemed to focus attention on the existence of the window frame, positioned on the border between inside and outside.

This perhaps explains why Albers and Mark Rothko (p. 64), one of the most prominent figures in Abstract Expressionism, single-mindedly reiterated the shape of the rectangular frame in their works. The depicted frames function in two principal ways:

1. They make an appeal to the viewer, saying, "When you're looking at the picture, always remember the frame which determines my borders. I am a flat, rectangular object made of wood with fabric attached to it. I will no longer pretend – as I did for the past 500 years when I was constrained by perspective – that I was creating another three-dimensional world instead of being a flat object."
2. However, Albers and Rothko did combine colors and forms through the use of special devices to create highly effective optical illusions. This causes the viewer see an imaginary depth and breadth which transcend the frame as a border around the painting and exist only in their mind. In other words, a depicted rectangular frame gave rise to something that transcended the physical rectangular frame.

This approach was followed in the 1960s by the advent of American Pop Art. Artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein (pp. 66–67) once again tried to con-

cretely depict the world outside the painting. To do this, they chose two-dimensional images made by other people, such as panels from American comics and face shots of movie stars. In the distant past, Alberti's conceived as painting as the depiction of a three-dimensional subject in a three-dimensional space in the picture plane by means of one-point perspective. But the Pop artists headed down a different road, depicting two-dimensional images in a two-dimensional picture plane.

Originally, Gerhard Richter, who made his debut in the '60s and remains at the forefront of international painting, based his work on these long-running trends. This explains why Richter took issue with the idea that it was not acceptable for an artist to depict things in their midst in an straightforward manner and to take a more circuitous route by depicting fragmentary images reflected in a window or translucent glass (pp. 142–143). Let us reexamine the following quote from Richter that was included in "14. Windows on Hope: Gerhard Richter's *8 Glass Panels*":

"When I look out of the window, then the truth for me is the way things look outside, in different tones, colors, and proportions. That is a truth and has a certain correctness. This detail, any detail of Nature, is a constant challenge to me, and it is the model for my paintings."[5]

The things that appear in Richter's frames (windows and panes of glass) are not images from the real world as it appears before our eyes. Nor are they scenes from history or mythology that merit a gaze, as in Poussin's work, or physically flat pictures equipped with geometrical shapes. They are detached by means of a fixed frame, but they were not intentionally selected by the artist. They are two-dimensional images that are crossed with ordinary, fragmentary, transitory Pop Art trends. With this detour, Richter explored the hope that paintings might once again become a form in which it was possible to depict some kind of subject inside a rectangular frame.

The Window and Society

Finally, I would like to move away from painting and touch briefly on the use of windows in the videos and theatre pieces of three Polish artists: Józef Robakowski, Tadeusz Kantor, and Zbigniew Rybczyński.

In Robakowski's work *From My Window* (pp. 94–95), discussed in Chapter 8, the rectangular frame of the video is integrated with the actual frame of the window in the artist's high-rise apartment. In the camera frame (or window frame), the real world

outside the window is literally depicted along with movements and the passage of time by means of visual technology that did not exist in Alberti's day. In other words, here, the surface of the screen functions as the surface of the window glass as the viewer gazes at the world outside.

The world on either side of the screen (or window glass) is distinguished by its tightly closed quality. Robakowski shot the work over a period of 22 years, from 1978 to 1998, as Poland moved away from socialism and embraced capitalism. However, Robakowski, with his camera in hand (the same position that the viewer occupies), remained shut up inside his room without going out on the street. And although this turbulent period was probably unfolding outside the rectangular frame of the screen, the view is restricted to what is visible inside the frame or window. We never catch a glimpse of what lies outside.

This sense of closed space is also apparent in the work of the other two Polish artists. For example, Kantor's *The Classroom – Closed Work* (pp. 98–101) is a three-dimensional work, which represents a closed classroom that can only be viewed from the outside through windows. Meanwhile, the focus in Rybczyński's *Tango* (pp. 128–129) is a three-walled room equipped with one window and three doors. The invisible fourth wall, separating the viewer from the room, is the fifth opening – i.e., the screen. This opening allows us to watch the 36 characters as they move in and out of the room through the window and doors, but of course we can never really enter the room. We also have no way of knowing what the people do after they leave the room and go behind the wall.

In sum, these works only provide us with a view of a closed world, which conversely has the effect of imploring us to imagine what might be happening outside the frame. It is also interesting to note that Kantor began his career by designing stage sets for plays that were presented in absolute secrecy in a room in an apartment in Nazi-occupied Poland. The distinctive characteristics of a tightly closed room and imagining the outside world are perhaps derived from this type of experience.

Polish art scholar Kasuya Akiko suggests that Poland was an exception among socialist countries in that it tolerated experimental artistic expression. But at the same time, there were strict regulations against straying outside a prescribed area.[6]

During the 1960s, new media, such as video and performance, gained prominence in the Western art world, where painting and sculpture had been predominant since the Renaissance. At the same time, a great effort was made in art as a whole to deal with the reality outside the frame in a more direct manner. Moreover, similar efforts emerged at the same time in other parts of the world. For example, the Japanese art group THE PLAY (pp. 116–121), which has pursued a diverse range of activities in

places such as rivers, mountains, and the sea for over 50 years.

As part of this global trend, the three Polish artists expressed an awareness of society by deliberately shutting themselves up in a closed space and imagining the reality of the world outside. The artistic expressions that came out of these closed rooms served as a metaphor for the society beyond the window. The wisdom of the artists' indirect approach might well provide us with some hints about how to develop our own expressive strategies for living in a world that threatens to become ever more regulated.

Conclusion

We have reached the end of this long journey through art based on the keyword "window." This keyword has also enabled us to undertake a fairly comprehensive review of textbook trends in art. At the same time, it has allowed to embark on a historical journey in which we gradually moved off the beaten path.

Once again, the window, both as a metaphor and an object with the physical characteristics of dividing the inside and outside, and opening and closing, is a surprising powerful way of transcending era and genre, and forging links between a diverse range of things.

Notes

1. Information on Japanese translations of these works are as follows: Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura* (Miwa Fukumatsu, trans., Chuo Koron Bijutsu Shuppan, 1996); Water Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *The Arcades Project Vol. 1* (Imamura Hitoshi, Mishima Kenichi, et al., trans., Iwanami Gendai Bunko, 2003), pp. 3–31; Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Clement Greenberg: Selected Writings* (Fujieda Teruo, ed. and trans., Keiso Shobo, 2005), pp. 62-76; Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria Part 3," *Bijutsu techo,* March 1997 (Hayashi Takayuki, trans., Hayashi Michio, commentary), pp. 174–191; Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting Vol. I* (Takahashi Nobuaki and Abe Koji, trans., Hosei University Press, 1998); Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Konishi Nobuyuki, trans., 1994, Libro Port), pp. 17–27; Victor Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting* (Okada Atsushi and Matsubara Tomoo, trans., Arina Shobo, 2001); and Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Ihara Keiichiro and So Hiroshi, trans., Sangyo Tosho, 2012).

2. Alberti, ibid., p. 26.

3. Louis Marin, "The Frame of Representation and Some of Its Figures" (Kurita Hidenori, trans. and commentary), *Seiyobijutsu Kenkyu* no. 9, 2003, p. 67.

4. Jack Flam, ed., *Matisse on Art* (California: University of California Press, 1995), p. 146. The text, transcribed from a 1942 radio interview, originally appeared in Pierre Schneider, *Henri Matisse: Exposition du centenaire* (Paris: Grand Palais, 1970).

5. Dietmar Elger, "Images in the Plural: Gerhard Richter's *14 Standing Panes for Toyoshima," Gerhard Richter*: 14 Panes of Glass *for Toyoshima, Dedicated to Futility*, Wako Works of Art, 2016, p. 41. Originally quoted from Christiane Vielhaber, "Interview with Gerhard Richter," *Das Kunstwerk* no. 2, April 1986, p. 43.

6. Kasuya Akiko, *Polish Avant-Garde Art: Applied Fantasy for Survival* (Sogensha, 2014), pp. 40–41.