

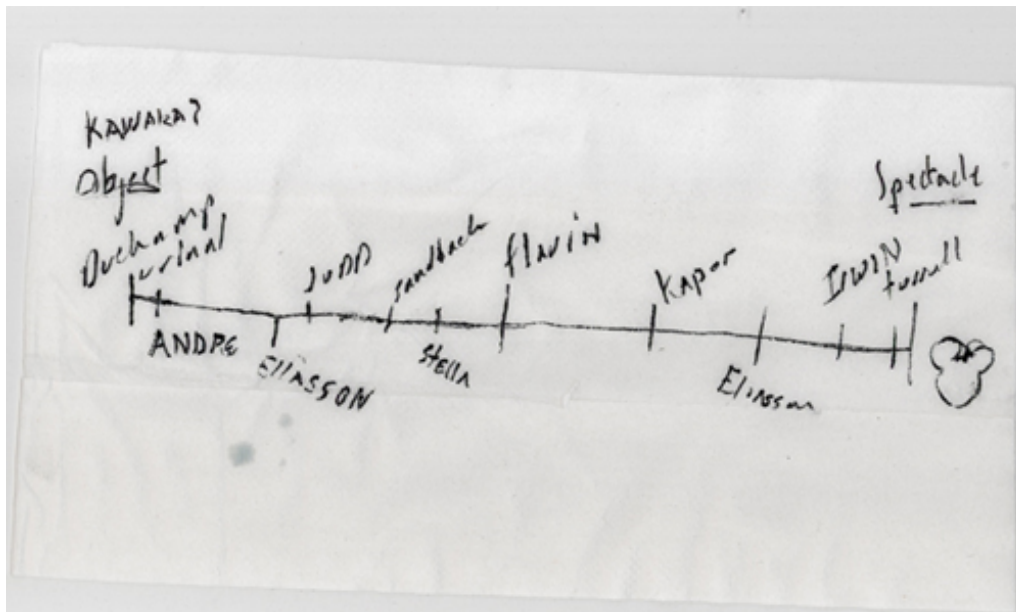
The Highlights - Fact or Fiction

When I was at Yale, Peter Halley used to ask his students whether they thought their work was fact or fiction. It was a good way to get people to try to understand their relationship to reality, or whether maybe their art dealt with something beyond that. Last month I was walking around Chelsea and saw exhibits by Robert Irwin and Fred Sandback that got me thinking about the "fact or fiction" question -- specifically, whether there is a parallel duality in abstraction between "real" or literal abstract art and visual spectacle. In other words, objects that draw attention to their literal presence, versus ones made in service of some other experience or illusion. And further, is a viewer's experience of looking influenced by these two ideas?

Fred Sandback's show at David Zwirner divided his work into three general categories: wall pieces in the preliminary gallery space, free standing planes in the gallery's main room, and tilted planes that leaned against the gallery's hallways. All the works were made with colored yarn. The Robert Irwin show at Pace divided the gallery into two large rooms. Each room was lit by a wall of fluorescent lights (one room red light, one room white light) in a non-repeating, grid-like pattern. There was one high-gloss black panel in the white room and two in the red that reflected the separate environments.

At Zwirner, watching people in the gallery gather the courage to cross through one of Sandback's articulated planes, I started thinking about how unusual his work's relationship to reality is. He sets up a unique dialogue between two types of awareness: what the viewers intellectually and visually recognize, and what their bodies experience. The viewers know that they are looking at ordinary string, and that the string is pinned to the gallery floor, ceiling, or wall. They see the same sort of open space both inside and outside the rectangular outlines. But they seem to viscerally experience the articulated planes as they would solid matter. Only rarely do gallery visitors venture to "break through" these planes, and seldom ever without the hesitancy of someone expecting to run into an invisible wall.

Simply "seeing" Sandback's imaginary planes, however, would only be so interesting. It's his insistence on the contradictions between obvious means, or fact, and implied presence, or fiction, which is crucial to his work's success. It's the interplay between different sorts of awareness that brings this success to pass by fracturing a relatively simple experience into something disorienting, anxious, and compelling. Without viewers consciously participating with the work on its multiple planes of experience, Sandback's art becomes merely what it declares itself to be: string.



When I first started talking to The Highlights about these ideas, I drew a little diagram to help illustrate some of them. The editors liked it and asked to have it included in this essay. So here it is.

Robert Irwin's show at Pace Wildenstein brought up different ideas of abstraction and subsequent ways of seeing. Irwin's work is not nearly so dependent on material facts or conscious looking. His use of translucent materials, reflective surfaces, and theatrical lighting dissolves the material presence of his work and creates a very different, more ephemeral experience. It's a sort of performance or magic trick. If you decide to go along with the spectacle, he's got you. The colored lights at Pace beautifully dissolved the architecture of the gallery, while the high-gloss panels then played optical tricks on the fluorescent lights themselves. This is all very carefully coordinated and specific, but Irwin doesn't draw attention to his labor or material decisions. Knowing why these phenomena happen in a literal way would change a mysterious, almost transcendent, experience to one more "real" and, in this case, far less interesting. This let-down says something about his work. Irwin's spectacle must not only make the work transcend its material reality, but also help the viewers move beyond their self-conscious awareness of their surroundings and their own physical bodies. With this, the viewer and art piece exist together somewhere a little beyond themselves.

In the hands of someone like Irwin or James Turrell, this is a very compelling experience. However, I still feel it isn't as interesting as the viewer relationship set up by Sandbach. I think this gets to one of the problems with the use of spectacle in art. Spectacle implies that the viewer is a spectator, and a spectator is a passive observer. In other words, if you ask your viewer to uncritically give themselves over to some illusion (to be spectators, not participants), you're really beginning to simply entertain them. If the content of the work is

purely in how convincing its spectacle is, then that artist's role is maybe best left to real experts like Walt Disney who can truly collapse any distinction between the real and unreal, fact and fiction.