

Interview with Peter Halley

By Kathryn Hixson

Kathryn Hixson: Your work seems to address the relationship between a public order and an interior isolated space. Did your childhood experiences affect your thinking about space?

Peter Halley: I grew up in midtown Manhattan, which during the time I was growing up changed from a residential neighborhood to one full of office towers, with almost no nature. There was just this huge, very abstract, very over-scale undifferentiated grid. The apartment building where I grew up was built in the '40s, a sixteen story building, made of very dark brown brick with neo-Georgian detailing. It has this creepy threatening character, this derailing tacked onto this huge Stalinist apartment block; it's a courtyard building, an open rectangle surrounded by building. The apartment was very tiny and whatever window you looked out of, you just saw brick walls and other windows. There was a sense of claustrophobia, without any sky or variation, which has really stuck with me.

KH: Your father, Rudolph Halley, became a prominent politician in New York before his death. What were the dynamics of your family life?

PH: My father died when I was just three. He was a lawyer, working for various judges and senate committees. He became a very prominent public figure during the latter part of his life. He was chief prosecutor for the Keafauver senate hearings in the early '50s, which investigated organized crime. My father became an instant celebrity when this series of hearings with various colorful mobsters was broadcast on television all over the country. Since my father died early and was sort of an idealized figure for me, it was easy to see in his work a kind of model for how one could conduct a professional life, in terms of wanting to contribute something and make an impact.

KH: Were there other early intellectual and artistic influences?

PH: I think also because I grew up in New York, I have felt a really profound connection with the New York School, especially to the heroic artist intellectuals like Rothko, Newman and Ad Reinhardt. Since my father's side of the family is Jewish and my family was somewhat intellectual, that gave me a particular affinity with the kind of intellectual roots that you see in the New York school of the '50s, particularly its existential orientation. It was very much a part of my cultural environment. Another intellectual connection from my childhood was my father's first cousin Carl Solomon, who was part of the Beatnik milieu. Allen Ginsberg's poem Howl, which is a kind of complaint about 20th century mechanization, was dedicated to him.

KH: How did you get into the visual arts?

PH: This was a great surprise to my family (laughs). No one had ever been accomplished in that way in my family, but I always loved to draw and to make things. I never had much of a sense that I was talented, in terms of the feedback I got from teachers or my family.

KH: What was your early education like?

PH: I went to a very traditional grammar school, almost like an English school. I feel that I have a classical foundation to my education, which I think connects me to Europeans, because I had French, Latin, and British style mathematics and geography.

[1967-75 Education]

KH: What was the atmosphere in secondary school?

PH: More or less by chance I ended up going to Phillips Academy in Andover. It was a really extraordinary school, unlike the popular image people have of prep schools and boarding schools. When I was there in the late '60s and early '70s, any vestiges of social class consciousness had disappeared. The school functioned as a meritocracy, where status was gained through achievement. That in general was a comforting atmosphere for me.

KH: Did Andover have a particularly interesting arts program, or did you get a more generalized education?

PH: In the late '40s a couple of people got the idea to really activate the Phillips Academy Andover program and created an extraordinary three years course of study in the visual arts. They also have their own art museum — the Addison Gallery of American Art — which has work by Homer, Pollock and Hopper. It's interesting because a number of very well-known artists have gone there: Frank Stella, Carl Andre, Hollis Frampton, Lucy Lippard, and younger people like Mel Kendrick and Carroll Dunham. At First the program was oriented towards Abstract Expressionism, but by the time I arrived it had become very Bauhaus oriented. A lot of the teachers had been trained at Yale, with Albers. This course of study emphasized my talents in design, color and general abstract formal problem-solving. It also emphasized media, the connection between art history and art, and between general culture and art. It really got me turned on to the idea of painting.

KH: What was the intellectual and political climate at Andover, during the late '60s?

PH: The ideology of my education was liberal modernism. As I was getting this art training, I was reading Camus and E. E. Cummings. The late '60s were a fascinating time at Andover. There was almost a total breakdown of any kind of respect for the norms of society. My particular brand of involvement with the late '60s was not so much political or leftist as absurdist. I was interested in things like the yippies and the new left tactics, more than I was in participating in any sort of Marxist-Leninist revolution.

KH: Do you think that that period gave you some feelings of freedom?

PH: Very much so. I consider myself part of that generation and its political point of view. From what I know now, I would almost call it situationist. I still believe in bringing the absurd, or theatre, in to the political or social arena; and within my own personal limits, it is something that I try to do in my art and writing.

KH: After Andover, then...

PH: The Dark Years...I wanted to go into a really top university and not to art school. The major universities at the time were seen as hotbeds of radicalism. Unfortunately, I went to the wrong one, at the wrong time. I chose Yale because they supposedly had a very strong art department. It turns out I was walking into the counter-revolution without realizing it. Yale had had a tradition of grooming

creative eccentrics, but that had disappeared. The art department had become much more conservative since Albers and Tworkov were there. It had returned to a from- -the-figure tradition and was very judgmental and regimented.

KH: So what did you do? How did you cope?

PH: Well, after two years of Yale I was thoroughly miserable. New Haven was very depressing and there was very little intellectual stimulation or excitement. I had visited a friend in New Orleans, and I immediately fell in love with the place and decided that I wanted to move there for at least a year.

KH: Was New Orleans appealing because it was not New York, or for its European-ness?

PH: At the time I had overly romantic fantasies of escaping the dreariness and rationalism of industrialized life as I had known it in the Northeast. I felt that New Orleans might be an alternative. New Orleans is very Catholic, Caribbean, oligarchical, and slightly European - and a universe unto itself. It was especially important for me intellectually, because it allowed me to see that societies could be different.

KH: So you were able to develop different parts of your personality and pursue different interests?

PH: I was there on my own for a year. I read a lot of art history, and started to develop a vocabulary that I was interested in. At the end of the year, I felt I should return to college. It didn't really seem feasible to go to a school in New Orleans, so I decided to go back to Yale and finish it up as quickly as possible.

KH: That was a very brave decision. Not a pleasant prospect.

PH: Upon arriving back in New Haven, they had instituted a portfolio review for art majors. They reviewed the work I had done in the past year, which even included some work from the figure. And they said "No, you can't be an art major".

KH: That must have been a blow. Your work wasn't up to "par"?

PH: It wasn't what they wanted, I didn't fit in. So I ended up majoring in Art History, continuing to take art courses. In the long run it was for the best. One strength I've always had is not really having to depend very much on external approbation as an artist. I always have had confidence that I was pursuing what I wanted to pursue, and I didn't have much choice in the matter. The one rich part of my experience at Yale was that I hung out with graduate students who knew what was going on in New York. The early '70s were a very exciting time in the art world and I very quickly became familiar with what was going on in conceptual and performance art circles.

[1974-78 Early Influences]

KH: Were you interested in any specific art historical issues at Yale?

PH: At the same time, I had become fixated on Matisse. This is around '74-'75 now and there were ideas around about decoration, exoticism, and a search for an aesthetic difference from Western European hierarchies of beauty. It was kind of a conservative period for me as well. I was very interested in Matisse's exoticism and his sense of trying to create a dream world separate from the rationalism of Western culture. I came to hate Matisse profoundly, because I considered him very hypocritical,

somebody who could never come to terms with the darker side of the psyche. But what I still have in common with Matisse is a desire to integrate the formal aspects of a picture and its symbolic content.

KH: Your interest in putting content back into formalism comes from Matisse?

PH: From both Matisse and then Picasso. I like the idea that they were painting pictures of something. I have always considered my work to be pictures of things, in some way or another. I've never really quite understood abstraction.

KH: What contemporary ideas in the art world interested you at this point?

PH: I was interested in Beuys, who was also a kind of exotic. For the work that I was doing then, I would go to the local equivalent of a Walmart — the K & B Store — and go to the children's art supply section and pick out gouache paints and wrapping paper. I used a lot of throw-away commercial materials. I thought of them as cargo cult materials; I thought of myself as a kind of primitive looking at the detritus of industrial culture. On these various kinds of patterned commercial materials, I overlaid rhythmic geometric patterns in primary colors. I had an interest in programmatic composition. I was also interested in Baldessari and the idea that you could have a kind of art that had an emotional range that was different from the heroic and super serious.

KH: So this was the work you were making in New Orleans before you went back to Yale?

PH: I began making this work then and I continued making it at Yale. Then I went to graduate school at a new graduate program at the University of New Orleans. I had taken a course with a professor there a couple of years previously, who was assigned to me as an advisor. Somewhere in the middle of the first year he decided I wasn't doing good work. I changed advisors, but it was another traumatic experience for me, where what I wanted to pursue was not accepted.

KH: How did your work develop in graduate school?

PH: I visited Europe in 1977 and went to Venice, and saw the Tintoretts, which had a big effect on me. All during the '70s I had adhered to this idea that Western art was over, and there should be some sort of non-Western alternative. I had studied Islamic art, African tribal art and Pre-Columbian art. But suddenly, I felt a tremendous need to come to terms again with the Western tradition. The vehicle through whom I tried to do that was Picasso.

KH: That seems odd.

[1978-80 Picasso Phase]

PH: I went through this intense Picasso phase between about '78 and '80, and my paintings were virtually neo-Picassoid, especially the Picasso of the '20s when he was doing the satires of Mondrian. I began to work on canvas again with paint and brushes. My work became more pictorial — there was a sense of a frontal horizontal plane in which geometric things were piled. And that's how I was thinking when I got to New York.

KH: Did the artistic scene in New York seem to offer more opportunity for you?

PH: I began to get inklings of some interesting things emerging in New York. I had seen a copy of the Pictures catalogue from Artists Space. But the most important thing for me is that I began to hear New

Wave music. A lot of it seemed to be coming from New York, like Blondie, the Talking Heads, and the Ramones. It began to appear to me that perhaps things were perking up in New York.

KH: When you returned to New York in 1980, what was your experience of the city?

PH: Things were very difficult for me at first, as a newcomer reintegrating myself. But very quickly my work began to change in response to living in the city. When I got to New York, all of this Picasso, European stuff seemed irrelevant. The actual subject of my work at the time had been the human figure, geometricized figures like some sort of sci-fi synthetic cubism. In New York, I really had a profound experience that the human figure was irrelevant.

KH: Why?

PH: Because the machine was so much more of a dominant force than actual flesh-and-blood bodies. I've always seen New York as de-sexualized place — hard-edged, and so much about power, social status, and appearance. The sexual erotic component which I had attached to the figure became somewhat sublimated or transferred into a kind of eroticization of technology and synthetic things.

[1980 – 84 Brick Walls]

KH: Could you trace the formal development of your work in 1980?

PH: I stopped trying to pile up some sort of human figure, and began painting brick waifs. Just like home.

KH: (Laughs)

PH: In brown. There might be a wall going across the whole canvas and above that some sky. Or a wall and in front of that another wall. They almost looked like details from a de Chirico. The problem with these paintings was that there wasn't any kind of radical approach to the materials.

KH: They were simply acrylic paint on canvas?

PH: They were just pictures. Then a very quick series of changes started to occur in the work. I became re-fascinated by Minimalism and Pop Art. Even though I wanted to continue to create pictorial things — more or less paintings — I wanted to find a much more radical means with which to paint these confining walled-up spaces.

KH: When you returned to New York, was your renewed interest in Minimalism and Pop a way to continue to deal with the modernist Western tradition?

PH: I think so. I finally caught up again with the present, coming at it from a different angle. This interest also implied a rejection of European modernism, just as the minimalist and Pop artists had rejected it. It was very important for me in the early '80s, and it continues to be important to me to avoid any pre-1945 influences. I honestly feel that the world changed so much after 1945 that one should concentrate on the issue of post-war art.

KH: You were describing an evolution of the work from the brick wall paintings. What means did you find to radically alter the pictorial surface?

PH: It seemed really stupid to paint brick walls with a little brush and some acrylic paint. I needed to push the space of the paintings — to make them more low relief, to make the forms — or cells — sit on

top of the background. I wanted to work mechanically; I was interested in an act of making, rather than painting. So I got the idea of using Roll-a-Tex, a material that I had seen all over in the suburban parts of New Orleans. It seemed to work in every way. It is a totally fake extra-terrestrial, science-fictional material.

[1985-89 Cells]

KH: What kinds of pictures did you make with the Roll-a-Tex material?

PH: I made representations of prisons at first. I was very much interested in a critique of ideal geometry. And later on they became cells.

KH: How did you progress from the figure to the critique of formalized geometry?

PH: It had been impossible for me, both psychologically and culturally, to draw the figure as a set of curves or as a photographic image. I felt alienated and mechanical. So that the only way I could get at this idea of the figure was by juxtaposing these plate-like hard geometric forms. It was only a short step from there to making the geometric form itself the subject.

KH: How did the work evolve within this investigation of geometry?

PH: In the first paintings, the whole surface was covered with Roll-a-Tex, with a window with bars in the middle. So the painting became a prison. Then I began to think about taking that object and putting a space around it, as Jasper Johns had done with his flag paintings. The cell went from being a painting to being an object in the painting.

KH: The painting becomes a painting of something, rather than being a collection of a purified abstract shape.

PH: Right. They were half squares. I wanted to say that geometry was something in the real environment. This idea of the idealist square could be seen as a paradigmatic, diagrammatic architectural entity. By putting bars on the square, I wanted to say that geometry was a prison. Structure and geometry were prisonlike and not ideal as in Malevich or Mondrian.

KH: Was this also a reaction to high minimalism? When I first saw that prison painting it was such a relief for me to see content in an abstract form re-placed with such a simple gesture.

PH: I was never able to accept that people like Judd and Stella were that abstract. Especially Judd. I always saw his work as boxes coming out of the factory. In some ways it seems a naive investment of meaning, but it did feel liberating to say that a square isn't just a square, it can be a prison. It can be something literal; it connotes something.

KH: Was your work a critique of idealist geometry in early modernism, as well as of more recent developments of transcendental space of abstract expressionism and the literal space minimalism?

PH: I wasn't really too worried about Mondrian or Malevich. I was really thinking about Stella, Judd, Newman and Rothko. The backgrounds of the first paintings were raw canvas. Since I began painting in the era of color field painting, the idea of putting this terse rigid connotation of a prison on a transcendentalist expanse of raw canvas seemed very funny and tart to me.

KH: By putting a spin on these idealized forms you show how the very same forms could be used or are used as instruments of control.

PH: The first work was really meant to be a parodic critique of transcendentalism. I wanted to take the evocative forms associated with Ryman, Marden, Newman and Rothko and make them mechanistic and cartoonlike. I also thought a lot about Guston in those days, his invention of a Beckett-like, gritty, prosaic universe.

KH: It seems that the contemporary nostalgia for the serious nature of that type of work is tied to a difference in how we see ourselves within society. The position of critical outsider, adopted by, for example, the minimalists in the mid-'60s, now seems untenable. There is no longer the possibility of being outside. Your work in the early eighties reflects this change of stance.

PH: I think the Pop artists felt that too, though intuitively — especially Warhol.

[1990-present Conduits]

KH: Perhaps that is the most recent precedent. To your connotation of a prison you added conduits which provided a possibility of communication or connection?

PH: At first I was working on this idea of the square becoming a prison on a transcendental background of raw canvas. I was working alone at home, listening to the radio, turning on electric lights, being able to turn on the faucet, flush the toilet, talk on the telephone, turn on the air conditioner. I began to become obsessed with the idea that all of these natural things — air, light noise, or speech were being piped in. I began to think about conduits.

KH: Then the prison became a cell with conduits. To me it is a shift from an isolated object or an object about isolation to one about systems of isolation.

PH: It is also a more modern visualization of isolation. The prison is still associated with the 19th century. The cell is like a capsule, an office with no windows, a cubicle. Getting rid of the window was very exciting, it made a very hermetic space. By the time I had codified that system of imagery — of cells and conduits — I began to feel that I had come up a kind of paradigm, or model, or representation of a very basic kind of space, and spatial experience in our society. And the fact that it was so hidden made it seem all the more interesting to me. I felt I was onto something.

[Neo-Geo, 80s on]

KH: Did the atmosphere in the art world of early '80s New York support your endeavors? Was there dialogue among artists about these sorts of issues?

PH: There were a number of people I knew in the early '80s who influenced me a great deal, Peter Fend, who was well connected with the whole Colab, Fashion Moda crowd, introduced me to a lot of different people. Jonathan Crary was very helpful to me by pointing out a lot of texts with which I was not familiar. I became a member of a biweekly discussion group of artists and critics which included a man named Rene Santos who had an extraordinarily ability to make new concepts very clear and apprehensible. I got to know Saint Clair Cemin, with whom I have had a very rich dialogue throughout the years. In '83 I had an opportunity to curate a show at John Weber Gallery called Science Fiction. Ross Bleckner, Richard Prince, and Jeff Koons were all in that show. Through curating that show I began to

personally get to know some of the artists that were doing some of the most interesting work at the time. Then this extraordinary thing happened around '84 or '85.

KH: The East Village days.

PH: Three or four new galleries sprung up all of a piece in the east village, run by young artists in their early '20s. Very quickly a scene developed around those galleries. It formed a social milieu for what is thought of as the neo-geo generation. Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo were important as catalysts in that group. Also my old friend Bob Nickas was active in supporting this new kind of art. It really was an extraordinary moment in my life because, for the first time, I was meeting people who basically saw society and culture and issues to do with art as I did. I was becoming part of a stimulating and confirming intellectual community for the first time.

KH: Do you think that this was a result of a confluence of interest in similar ideas, a development of artistic practices as a reaction to the work of the late '70s and early '80s.

PH: I consider my generation to be a continuation of the work of the Pictures generation, though the continuity between generations was interrupted by the brief popularity of the neo-expressionists. In about '80, the economy was relatively buoyant after the Carter years — confused but buoyant. Artists who were interested in the media and conceptual twists, like Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Sarah Charlesworth, Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo were coming to the fore. In '82, there was an extraordinary recession and a sense of doom and gloom in the whole country. My theory is that the only time that the class that is interested in art will go for adventurous art is when money is easy and capital is really flowing. That's what the '60s were about, and the mid '80s. But in '82-'83 there was a severe recession and the new Reagan money was going for depression art — neo-expressionism — causing work by the Pictures generation to be pushed aside for the moment.

KH: After that market situation played itself out...

PH: No, it didn't play itself out, cultural forces arose to oppose it. And those forces were put into motion by a group of artists and not by professional galleries. The new work was really forced on the galleries by the scene in the East Village.

KH: What caused the cultural tide to turn?

PH: Then some of the brighter influential people in the New York art world decided that this new work which was being shown at places like International with Monument and Nature Morte was important. This includes people like Michael Schwartz and a lot of other critics and collectors. To my mind, at least the intelligentsia of the art world had come to its senses.

KH: In what way?

PH: We called the cultural bluff on the issue of simulation. Neo-expressionism was a kind of simulation of pre-war modernism, a Disneyland version of the School of Paris, made for shopping malls. I think by drawing attention to this whole idea of simulation and questioning influence, we presented a conscious alternative to neo-expressionism.

[Day-Glo Colors]

KH: Let's return to your work. You began using Day-Glo colors in '81 and '82. Why did you decide to use Day-Glo pigment straight out of the jar?

PH: The work has always had a cinematic or narrative quality. Specifically I began to think that some form of energy was moving through the conduits and illuminating the cells. I started using Day-Glo red to make the cells glow. I was trying to emphasize technologically derived materials and I also liked Day-Glo's connection to Pop and Psychedelia, in a nostalgic sense. The quality of the glow that it produced seemed very artificial, unnatural and eerie to me. In a quite traditional way, I have always been interested in light in painting.

KH: It seems similar to the difference between film as reflected and video as emitted light. The light from your paintings seem to be emitted from the surface, instead of reflected from other sources of light. It is sort of a post-Pop use of light — to turn the manipulation of light from being aesthetic or transcendental, to being an acrid glow, a more contemporary claustrophobic light.

PH: There are various artists since the 60 's who have been very concerned with capturing a certain kind of alienating bizarre industrial light, such as Naumann, Flavin, Judd and Robert Smithson. For me it was important, for quite a long time, that the color and choice of paints were entirely from found sources. It connected me back to Pop-Fluxus-Minimalist decision-making in which the artists intentionally tried to use materials that were given to them by the culture.

KH: Is this a strategy to relinquish control, in order to be relieved of having to consider "aesthetic" decisions separately?

PH: Rather than fight the culture, you allow the culture in as much as possible. That act of non-judgmental embrace can flip around to become a critical act.

[Post –minimalism]

KH: Using found sources also has to do with a desire to become re-connected to contemporary popular culture.

PH: That is what I wanted to emphasize. During that time I was really quite troubled by the themes and materials artists had taken up since the minimalist era. I have a unique view of recent art history in which I see the change between minimalist impersonality and the post minimalist emphasis on personal sensibility as being crucial. Post- minimalism began a sequence of events that ended up with neo-expressionism as its most debased progeny. Minimalist and Pop Art posited that art should deal with a public, sociological world, using materials produced by technological society and themes from the media and the commercial arenas.

KH: Was your use of unmixed Day-Glo colors and commercial products such as Roll-a-Tex a way to once again address social issues?

PH: I always tried to work that way. There is a very important underlying issue here, about how one views the psyche. Traditional liberal humanism says that somehow we have a private psyche that is separate from the social. In my early years in New York, I developed the intuition that one's psychic life was inseparable from one's social identity. This issue is of paramount importance to my work.

KH: Is this belief influenced by Warhol?

PH: It was certainly reinforced by Warhol. I think it is an intuition I have always had. To posit the psyche as something private and separable from social identity is very dangerous — politically dangerous.

KH: Well, I'm sure there are political reasons that the idea of a separate psyche is maintained in the culture.

PH: Any Marxist would say that the fiction of a personal private identity is a way of alienating individuals from a sense of empowerment about their social situation.

KH: In your work you are depicting the social systems of control, how we experience them, and understand their manifestation in the spatial systems in which we live. Could you trace that investigation through the paintings?

PH: The investigation was based as much upon the paintings, as the paintings were on the investigation. I have always emphasized that the configurations in the paintings, the idea of cells and conduits and how they are connected and how I decided to put them together as a pictorial space, was entirely an intuitive project. Sometimes I say that I paint so that I have something to think about. The basis of intellectual and artistic investigation into the social has to be intuitive. You can't rationally or systematically study these things as a sociologist or psychologist might suggest. The only route into an understanding of hidden sources of power in the social is an intuitive one, through the subconscious or the unconscious, from an anti-rationalist point of view - in an obsessive or incantatory way. That is how most of the insights of the people I'm interested in have occurred, such as with Michel Foucault and even Freud. If you thought of such an investigation as a rational systematic one, you would be simply part of the phenomenon you were trying to describe. The rational without the intuitive is a highly ideological construct.

KH: The belief that rational investigation is not ideological or subjective is another ideological construct. Are you saying that the intellectual can include the intuitive?

PH: Not only can it include the intuitive, the intellectual is the intuitive. The problem is when intuition is detached from the intellect. Intellectuality in art has been associated with rationalism, in the heritage of the Bauhaus and conceptualism. I think this is a terrible mistake. If you equate intellectualism with rationalism, you are condemning intellectuality by saying that the intellectual is simply the technocratic. As somebody who believes in thought and dialogue, I think it is very important to distinguish between intellectuality and rationality.

KH: In your paintings, the restriction to geometric form sets up an internally "logical" system or order, which is continually straining against the specific colors and composition of the particular manifestation.

PH: That's true. I am highly attracted to the idea of rationality and order, and confining differentiated structures. But in the work I have always treated them ironically or skeptically. As my work began to mature, I became less interested in freeing myself from my own ideological mindset. Rather than try to liberate myself in some sort of romantic way, I began to become interested in investigating my ideological assumptions as a kind of Absurdist phenomenology. Why are squares and geometry comforting to me? Is it really a form of comfort or a form of confinement? Why am I happy in a car or in

a room alone? Is this something desirable, or is this a result of being influenced by a certain set of messages from my culture?

KH: Were you able to find answers to these questions? How did you go about investigating these ideas in your work?

PH: In a self-critical way, in terms of my own psychological experience. I began a meditation on how order and rationalism represented confinement. I think that most of the work up until the mid-eighties was based on different shades of emotional and intuitive reaction to that problem.

KH: By confining yourself consciously to the strict vocabulary of forms, you were able to investigate the inter-relations of the forms more thoroughly?

PH: I wasn't confining myself to a vocabulary of forms. I was confining myself to picturing a kind of space I thought I was in. With a repetitive, obsessive approach to spatial issues, I found that I was capable of including a wide range of affective reactions to the special situation I was describing. Sometimes I felt it was exciting and scintillating, pop and intoxicating, and sometimes I felt it was depressing, gloomy and bleak.

[Series]

KH: In this exhibition in Bordeaux your paintings are arranged in chronological order, in which a progression of changes becomes apparent.

PH: One of my major motivations in having the opportunity to organize this show was to regroup the paintings in series. I don't work on formal series like Frank Stella or Andy Warhol, but there are quite definite series and groups that develop in and of themselves, reflecting emotional and intellectual changes in my life as an artist.

KH: What were your concerns in the first series represented in this exhibition?

PH: In the paintings in this exhibition, the first series is made up of paintings from 1985, which are bleak and existential, I think it was a very gloomy combination of a sickly yellow against black. I was thinking a lot about Beckett at the time. There are several significant things that come up in this series. In Prison with Underground Conduit the prison and conduit don't connect. I didn't set out to make a painting with a specific iconographic message, but since I was feeling alienated and isolated that's how it came out pictorially. In the second painting in that group, Cell with Smokestack and Conduit I imagined that the conduits were carrying something that illuminated the cells, a kind of Duchampian illuminating gas which was then emitted from the smokestack. Then, in a kind of satirical pseudo-logical or para-logical way, I wanted to see what would happen if I put the prison and the cell with smoke stack together, connected by a conduit that's no longer illuminated but rather dark. This painting, Prison and Cell with Smokestack with Conduit, was a particularly bleak picture of two different isolated spaces linked inextricably together.

KH: In Two Cells with Circulating Conduit the cells are connected by conduits to create a closed, but potentially active circle of communication.

PH: The transition between Prison and Cell with Smokestack with Conduit and Two Cells with Circulating Conduit was crucial for me. Psychologically, it was about a sense of catharsis and a transformation of

something very bleak into something that had more of a sense of movement. Even though it was still confining, it was more optimistic. It also allowed me to represent pictorially the sense of closure and self referentiality that I was ascribing to late 20th century culture in general. But again, I didn't set out to represent that sense of closure, the image simply emerged in the course of the transformation from one painting to the next. Two Cells with Circulating Conduit led to another series of paintings of '86, with S shaped conduits, Glowing Cell with Conduits, and Yellow Cell with Conduits. At that point the relationship between cell and conduit changed. Previously the conduit had run along horizontally and gone up into the cell and back down into the horizontal line. In '86, I began to make paintings in which the conduit went up into the cell, emerged through the top, and exited stage right. These paintings had a greater sense of dynamism and speed. The identity of the cell was no longer that of a terminus. It became a kind of transformer or microprocessor through which the conduit had to pass. In these paintings of '86, the vocabulary became very pop, aggressive, and much more animated. The optimism and excitement of that work definitely reflected the dynamism I felt about being involved in the scene oriented around the galleries in the East Village. I felt that my life was becoming much more pop. I began to identify with the cell as a transformer of cultural processes of which I was a part, and not just an endpoint.

KH: You painted what you felt?

PH: Exactly. And as traditional as that may sound, I'm not really troubled by it. I think it also reflects that I don't have a rational programmatic agenda like LeWitt or Judd. The drift and change in the work is something I get a great deal of pleasure out of — it is continually interesting to me.

KH: How would you describe the interactions of the colors that you use?

PH: It is not about color, but rather how the color combines. It is entirely linguistic.

[Fame]

KH: After the optimism and dynamism of the paintings from 1986, what happened?

PH: I got famous. Believe it or not it was a little bit depressing. Around 1987, the world-wide interest in the neo-geo movement peaked and there began to be quite a lot of press, the real media. It was an interesting experience, but I felt detached and was never really interested in buying into it. On a serious level, I am deeply gratified; my work has had some sort of international impact. On a personal level, while it was going on, it was alienating in several significant ways. My work was being robbed of its content — the journalists were just interested in the phenomenon of success. Maybe I wasn't pop enough to get my message out in a broad sense. At the same time, the various artists who had won recognition were becoming separated from one another.

KH: You were thrown back into an alienated aloneness?

PH: Yes, an aloneness again. Which resulted in the work in the next series — of '87-'88 — these very still symmetrical paintings with horizontal conduits that don't touch the cells. I began to use color in a very codified and almost subdued way. The cells seemed very isolated and alone. They were very frontal, hieratic, and almost obstinate: the cell was present but mute. The paintings quite consciously refer to a Newmanesque kind of presence or here-ness. They were also about a refusal to speak.

KH: As a defensive posture?

PH: Not defensive so much as defiant. If the media wanted me to spout, in my work, I wanted to be mute. I wanted to make paintings that were dignified, centered, that had presence.

KH: So after that period of refusal did you reconcile yourself with fame?

PH: On some level, I refused fame.

KH: It seems that you are not that interested in fame - in the sense that you can non-judgmentally consider that some people are interested in participating in or manipulating aspects of fame in the art world or mass society. You are much more interested in participating in an intellectual tradition.

PH: At the same time as the Newmanesque paintings, I did the three-panel paintings. I was interested in the idea of technological time and cinematic time, time which is made into segments that can be recombined in any sequence. I painted a painting called No Man's Land, which is a flat horizontal black panel with a red panel underneath. There is a horizontal conduit but no cell just a blank empty bleak landscape. I liked it as an apocalyptic landscape, but I also realized that I had created a generic unit of space. It was something I could think of as "a space", an abstract space, a piece of space, a signifier of space. With these generic spaces, I wanted make paintings about time as defined by sequential segments; they were like representations of abstract movies. Several of them were titled after Godard movies like Weekend and Alphaville.

[Play]

KH: In the work following these three-panel paintings, you introduce significantly more activity, in terms of a wider palette of color and increased number of conduits emerging from the cells. What caused these changes?

PH: The crisis of my public identity came to a head in '88 or '89. At that time, I think, the work underwent a profound change. I came out of that period with a very liberating sense of being in a marvelously absurd position. I gained a sense of play about my own position, and about the subject matter I was dealing with, and that really began to affect the work.

KH: So by play, you mean accepting the position that you were in...?

PH: I began to think it was funny rather than depressing.

KH: And so the paintings and the colors became wilder and more complex?

PH: Yes. Similar to my everyday life. Sometimes on a busy day in the studio, the phone and the fax machine will start going off — there will be messages from all over; from Los Angeles and Europe. There is a sense of absurd conjunction and information bouncing around. All of these very disparate things are juxtaposed through my activity as an artist. It has become a real source of pleasure for me. The atmosphere in the studio has also gotten very pop. I work with three or four extremely talented younger artists, and I'll get ideas from them about specific projects. There is various kinds of input from them that I find to be exciting feedback. This is a big change for me because, up until I was thirty, I always worked in complete physical isolation. I think my ego structure has changed. Instead of plodding along a self-regulated path, my experience is much more disjointed and unpredictable.

KH: You don't feel that you've lost control? Or did you want to lose control?

PH: In a good way. I don't feel that I've lost control. It is just a much more subtle kind of control.

KH: Which is the absurdist kind of acceptance of spontaneity?

PH: Exactly. And that is key to the new work as well, an acceptance of spontaneity. Relatively.

KH: How does this absurd popism of your experience manifest itself in the paintings?

PH: The first thing I started thinking about was color. I decided that I was bored with working with a didactic vocabulary. One painting in the Newmanesque series, Red Cell is cadmium red in front of Day-Glo red. At the time, it was almost like committing sacrilege to use a traditional artists' color. I had begun using artists' colors in a vacuumform edition in 1987, and I started to think that I could work with a broadened vocabulary of color. At the same time I began thinking about Stella's protractor paintings a great deal, which have such a fantastic coloristic vocabulary. Then, I began to juxtapose and intermix the Day-Glo colors that I had always used with other kinds of traditional colors to see what would happen. I wanted to see, if by operating in a non-didactic manner, I could create a space and light that was more intense than that which I had created by sticking to a didactic program.

KH: You also began to vary the size of the conduits.

PH: I wanted them to become thicker, like arteries opening to accommodate an increased flow of blood. I began to do arbitrary irrational things with them. The conduits no longer followed any kind of pathway that would describe a linear flow of information or energy. Most sacrilegiously of all, I made some of them come out of the sides of the cells and go up vertically. It seemed very funny to me because, in a technological vocabulary, nothing should go up to the sky. It was a transcendental kind of idea. There is no reason for it. These paintings became general networks of jumbled, complex and irrational sets of interconnected relationships. I realized that the work up to about 1988 was about describing an inventory of objects: a cell, a prison, cells with conduits, etc. They were nominal, like nouns. I think of the new paintings as much more verbal, they are more about motion. They are about being in the space rather than looking at a picture of it. They give me the feeling of rushing around in that space, of flowing through it rather than looking at a diagram of that flow.

KH: Earlier paintings of yours seem to repel or intimidate. These new paintings seem to swallow you.

PH: Another thing I have thought about a lot in the last couple years is cars. Porsche makes Porsches and a Porsche is a certain thing, but the engineers at the company are constantly trying to figure out how to make a better Porsche — a faster more highly charged Porsche. I'm not interested in the idea of beauty. I am trying to make faster paintings. Where can I put a turbo charger? How can I reduce the drag and make it look really hot?

KH: They do look pretty hot. How did you develop the color schemes in these recent paintings? It is a mixture of Day-Glo and artists colors, but the juxtapositions and the particular tones that you choose are very odd and aggressive.

PH: By working very spontaneously. One of the issues that I'm most concerned with is pushing the envelope of what can be done coloristically in a painting. On a formal level I feel that most contemporary painting is too conservative.

KH: Within traditional painting, do you think of the color's associations with different aspects of culture? Putting a dull brown next to a pale blue is almost nauseating.

PH: After I do them I sometimes think of the associations with bad taste. But what really specifically interests me is that the use of color can be transgressive. I find it exciting if I can make some awkward color or combination of colors work. The other thing I have been interested in since 1988 is the idea of spatial ambiguity, a confusion between background and form, that's like the phenomenon of synesthesia or psychedelic overload.

[Sculpture]

KH: How do your recent forays into low-relief cast-fiberglass sculpture relate to your paintings?

PH: Working in sculpture allows me to take my concerns into a somewhat different direction. These new paintings are not gloomy anymore, they're practically hysterical and hyper. In the sculpture I can return to that Beckett-like existential world of darkness, greyness and twilight, which is also a part of my emotional life. To my mind, a painting cannot be anecdotal, it should be a general treatise. I've always wanted to expand on the idea of low-relief in the paintings into a cinematic world where I can talk about fake haunted house and science-fiction textures. Given my ideas on what a painting is, I can't allow my paintings to be about those things. In the sculpture, I can engage in a parallel activity that is somewhat more relaxed, more theatrical, and hopefully more humorous. When I was working on them, I visited several set shops in movie studios in Los Angeles. I felt like I had entered a sacred symbolic world. There was hanger after hanger, filled with people making things that looked like they could be in the real world but that had no functional purpose. In the sculpture, I work with very physical, textural materials that are then cast as a hollow undifferentiated fiberglass skin. They get very close to that feeling of immateriality, fakeness, and facade, which are important ideological elements in our culture.

[Change]

KH: Your body of work is not only coherent and consistent, but also embodies a coherent progression of development or change. How would you describe your process of change?

PH: Glacial. Imperceptible. Usually I don't realize I have made a change until after the change has occurred. I don't understand what the changes are about until well after the work has been done. Ever since I was a student, I have been fascinated by artists who work in terms of very small changes, such as Picasso, Stella, and Warhol. The organization of this show reflects my fascination with those changes — how a simple small change in a painting can affect its meaning so radically. There are several sets of paintings in this exhibition in which only one color or one element has been changed. I think is interesting and important that you can identify the change and the changing signifier, and know how the signifier changes the work.

KH: Each of your paintings is viscerally direct and has immediate impact as a unified whole.

PH: I strongly believe in making art that can be looked at quickly. We live in a society of informational and cultural overload. The idea of a Cezanne, for example, which you can study for hours and various nuances are revealed, seems very out of touch at least with my own psychic life. I want to make something explosive and immediate. And hopefully explosive and immediate each time you go by and take a quick look at it.

- "Peter Halley: Oeuvres de 1982 à 1991" exhibition catalogue, CAPC, Musee d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, 1991, pp. 9-33