

The Moment Space Comes into Being

Marion Piper: LUX at Cromer Artspace on the Prom, 15 – 26 June 2023

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How would you respond if someone were to ask you to define the limits of space?

You might measure length, height, depth, and volume for an answer. Or you might look for complex mathematical calculations to triangulate the position of stars and planets, measuring the speed and age of light, the curvature of space, and the force of gravity, always keeping in mind the arrow of time. Or you might measure the length of time it takes for sound echoes to return to you to arrive at an answer. Then again, you might consider the work of Marion Piper.

Through her work Marion demonstrates an eagerness to understand where the limits of visual space are. Where these limits collapse, where they diverge birthing new limits, where they resist her efforts to challenge them. When I say 'visual space' I mean the space of the visual field in her work, her pictorial space. What we see happening on the paper or on the canvas is the making physical of this visual space; the division and structuring of this space.

Philosophically, space is often referred to in terms of an 'event,' and I think we could extend that notion of event to Marion's visual field. She upholds the idea that:

Ordinary objects are supposed to have relatively crisp spatial boundaries and vague temporal boundaries; events, by contrast, would have relatively vague spatial boundaries and crisp temporal boundaries.¹

This means that objects have distinct edges but an uncertain relationship to time, while events have clear beginnings and endings in time but no 'edges' to speak of. Marion's soft watery grey areas that come up against crisply defined coloured shapes are a visual interpretation of this notion and they create an immediate division in her pictorial space.

The work of Lygia Clark is relevant to Marion's endeavour here because of Clark's long-term engagement with the boundaries of space, and a desire to transcend those limits. In her two-dimensional works, Clark's aim was to 'compose a space, and not compose in it.'² We can see a similar aim in Marion's work as she walks the line between geometric form and free form, between intent and happenstance. This divide runs through and separates the planes of visual space in Marion's work. This same divide tracks the visual differentials of space between surface and ground, and the

tacit space of gesture. That is, the 'implied' or 'unspoken' spatiotemporal event of gesture. Clark's *Bichos* can also give insight to this notion of gesture as an event.

As a three-dimensional object, viewers were required by Clark to move the interlocking hinged planes of the *Bichos* to create the object's form. Looking for 'an organic space — spaces that open up to the viewer,'³ Clark's interest was in the event of interaction with the object where a kind of body-to-body occurrence happens in space, creating a newly formed space. Such a tacit space is a space where gesture is understood as intrinsic to the work generally (in Clark's work), the mark specifically (in Marion's work), and the habitable location of sight where our eyes see space.

However, unlike Clark, Marion is not removed from her work, standing at some distance to it, rather she is entangled with it. It is all around her, and she is within it. For me this is evident in the temporality of the work, the duration of each piece, coupled with the accumulated duration visible when she places multiple pieces together to make a larger whole. The duration of Marion's work evidences her immersion in it. Marion says, 'The process of loose directions or "rules" produces an almost "hands off" detached way for the work to emerge.'⁴ But this kind of detachment should not be understood as being 'removed' from the work. It is more a way to loosen and lose the ego so the work can begin. It is a way for Marion to move her creative sensibilities into the pictorial space of making. Marion becomes 'neutral' here, and this neutrality, as Roland Barthes discussed in his penultimate lecture, *The Neutral* in 1978, is significant for her work in several ways. Barthes wrote, 'the thought of the Neutral is in fact a borderline thought, on the edge of language, on the edge of color [*sic*], since it's about thinking the non-language, the noncolor...'⁵ This notion of the 'borderline' thought, being on the edge of language and colour, resonates through Clark's work to Marion's, where communication is made by 'non-language,'⁶ and 'non-colour' is fundamental to divisions of space.

Regarding colour, including distinct black and white areas, Barthes explains that, with colour, opposition is found in a binary system of 'marked,' or distinct colour. Whereas the neutral tone of grey is 'unmarked,' or indistinct. However, Marion's colour choices qualify the space making it be what it is.⁷ These choices are used as a structural device to delineate space and to infer light, rather than as a semiotic meaning making element of Barthes's binary. While Marion has a back story for her palette choices, mostly it is a personal meaning that does not affect how the work is understood. These colours could be changed for any other colour, and it would still be evident that Marion is exploring the boundaries of space in the work. The colour allows Marion to locate a division of space within her neutral grey field, which is its own space, and therefore not indistinct in Barthes's terms.

Because Marion side steps Barthes's binary coded meaning, she finds a way to fulfil Barthes's desire for the Neutral to become an 'exemption from meaning.'⁸ Or said differently, what we might think of as a space of analogy,⁹ where a layer forms because of its visual relationship to another layer. Therefore, the condition of neutrality allows for an exploration of the structure and form of her pictorial space without preconceived notions of any meaning these structures and forms may carry. Within this condition, 'nuance' becomes activated. Barthes writes:

The monochrome (the Neutral) substitutes for the idea of...nuance: nuance becomes a principle of all-over [*sic*] organization (which covers the totality of the surface...) this integrally and almost exhaustively nuanced space is the shimmer...: the Neutral is the shimmer [whose] aspect, perhaps whose meaning, is subtly modified according to the angle of the subject's gaze.¹⁰

We can see this kind of all-over shimmering nuanced space in Marion's work. And it is precisely because of these qualities of the neutral, we can see where analogies form, where the lines of distinction between spaces can be drawn. We see how one space qualifies the next. In this way, Marion is showing us how space comes into being. Barthes suggests that perhaps the Neutral is to accept such a qualification 'as nothing more than a moment: a time.'¹¹ Or perhaps, the Neutral is to acknowledge the analogical relationships and the event of gesture that precede the moment space comes into being.

¹ Casati, R., and Varzi, A., 2020. Events. [online] *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/events/> [Accessed: 5 Apr 2023].

² Jacques, A., n.d.. *Lygia Clark*. [online] Alison Jacques Gallery. Available at: <https://alisonjacques.com/artists/lygia-clark> [Accessed: 13 Apr 2023]. Marion visited this exhibition at Alison Jacques Gallery, London in 2020, and has seen three other public exhibitions of Clark's work. She saw *Rhythm and Geometry*, Sainsbury Centre, Norfolk 2022; *Sur Moderno: Journeys of Abstraction—The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift* at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 2019; and *Radical Geometry*, Royal Academy of Arts, London 2014.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Piper, M., 2019. End use and factors of production. [online] Marion Piper: READER: Talk Notes. Available at: <https://www.marionpiper.com/post/reader-talk-notes> [Accessed: 4 Apr 2023].

⁵ Barthes, R., 2005. From the Neutral: Session of March 11, 1978. Translated from French by R. Krauss. *October*, vol. 112, Spring, pp.3-22. Quote from p.12.

⁶ Curator Christine Macel explains Clark's interest and engagement with border spaces and boundary edges in her three-part essay, *Lygia Clark: At the Border of Art*, (2017) for MoMa on Clark's work. This is a theme that runs throughout Clark's work and Macel provides a deep analysis of how important this was to Clark's creativity and work, which I don't have space to deal with fully here. In Part 3, Macel describes Clark's notion of a 'preverbal language' that I align here with Barthes's idea of 'non-language.' Both function beyond the limitations of language.

⁷ Ibid, p.14. I borrow this notion of Marion's colour making the space be what it is from Barthes's discussion here of Boehme's quality equalling 'an active force, something that throws itself, spurts and grows, that "qualifies," that is, something that makes a thing be what it is...nuance.' I'll get to this idea of nuance in the essay shortly.

⁸ Ibid, p.5.

⁹ This notion of analogy as 'relationship' is borrowed from Kaja Silverman's *Miracle of Analogy* (2015), where she explains her meaning is not that of a comparison, but of the philosophical notion of an analogy of being, which I understand as a network of relationships that define and modulate all elements within the network.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.11.

¹¹ Ibid, p.22