

PETER HALLEY

Conversation with Karlyn De Jongh
Halley studio, New York, USA, 19 February 2009



*Peter Halley (*1953, New York, USA) paints colourful, geometric works depicting the relationships between what he calls 'prisons' and 'cells'—icons that reflect the increasing geometricization of social space. Since 1980, Halley has been living and working in New York City.*

KDJ: At first sight your works may seem mostly related to space, but I feel the concepts of 'time' and 'existence' are appropriate too. How do you yourself understand your work in reference to these concepts of time, space and existence?

PH: I think visual art probably most directly addresses the issue of space. Time becomes more elusive, and existence even more so. Certainly from the 50s to the 70s, the themes of time, space, and existence were central existentialist questions, and almost defined what art was trying to address. That has changed greatly. With the rise of post-structuralism around 1980, the issue of existence has been pushed to the side. Everything is seen as mediated and essentially unknowable—as if the philosophical existential questions are unapproachable.

KDJ: How do you feel that relates to your own work?

PH: To some extent I adhere to that point of view. But it probably constitutes a reduced mission for art. If the arts only address questions of social practice, are they capable of approaching such questions?

On the other hand, my work does present a very basic existential conundrum. In the early eighties, I painted plain, simple, square prisons. In these works, the square was no longer an idealist form, but rather a confining space. I was interested in the idea of isolation. When I first came to New York, I felt the isolation of living in an apartment—it was a singular, individual existence. I imagined being in a box stacked up with many other boxes. I was also very interested in the late paintings of Phillip Guston, with their existentialist gloom.

Afterwards, there was a transformation in my point of view. The more I thought about my situation, I realized that I wasn't so isolated, that I was tied in with others—not through an experience of shared public space, but rather through all kinds of media—such as the telephone or television, and later the internet. The space of my work became

premised on the idea that the way we live is characterized by physical isolation, but that we are reconnected through technology. Technology and economics create these channels of communication in ways that we do not choose. I pictured this by painting bands that I call 'conduits', that connect the prisons and cells.

I also became very interested in Baudrillard in the mid-eighties. I saw him as a writer who was really struggling to describe the hermetic world and the mindset that the social forces in our era have created.

KDJ: If you cannot get outside of those human conditions—do you experience that as a prison?

PH: Yes, that condition can be seen as imprisoning. Fredric Jameson wrote a book in 1972 called *The Prison-House of Language*. Within the linguistic model, language is the only thing we know to be real. Language doesn't allow us to get passed itself to reach issues of existence.

KDJ: Are the conduits connecting prisons and cells related to the connectivity between individuals?

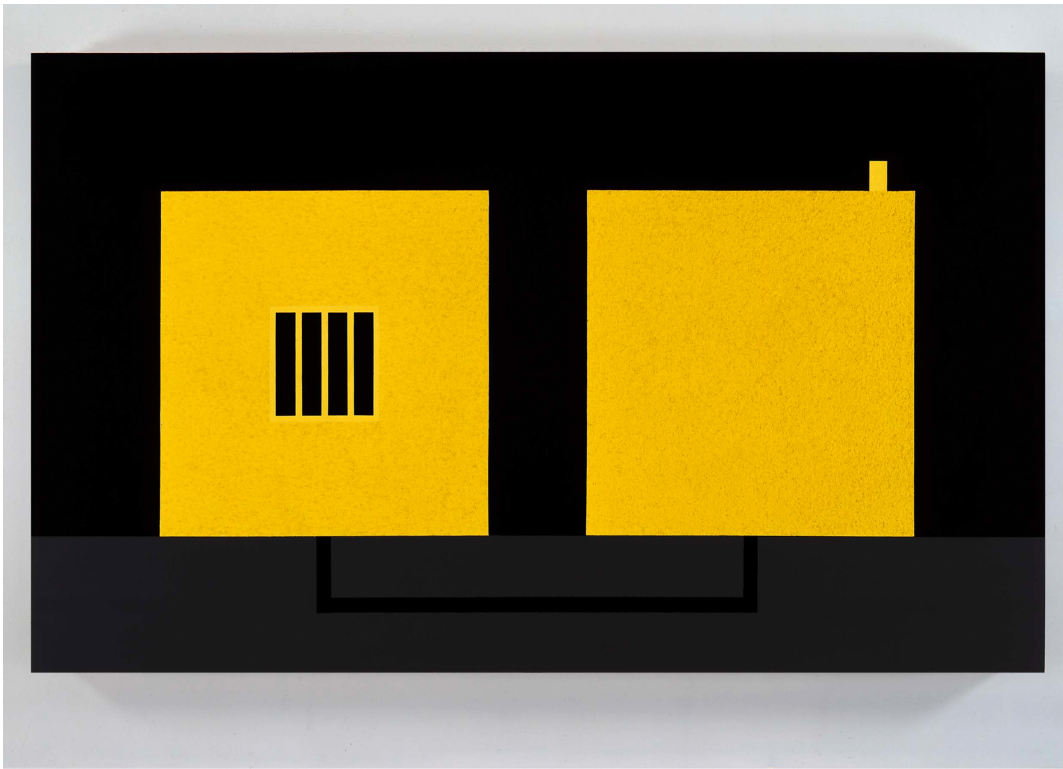
PH: The connectivity between people is the basis of the pleasure of life to me. I am not the kind of artist who is interested in the so-called natural world.

KDJ: That you are not interested in the 'natural world', does that have something to do with the fluorescent colors you use in your paintings?

PH: That's right. I believe that there really was a crisis about the idea of nature in the 80s. It began earlier than that, especially with Warhol, but in the art world of the 80s, it was in full swing. Until then, nature was seen as the absolute, essential referent. But as our landscape itself has becomes more and more artificial, and communication becomes more dependant on technology, the relevance of a natural referent obviously disappears. All of a sudden, artists were challenging the idea that, in a media-saturated society, nature could be seen as a meaningful referent. It was happening in work that is much different than mine. For example, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman were all about challenging essentialism.

KDJ: Even though you are American, it seems these European existential questions are important to you. How do you yourself see life in relation to death?

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PH: I've observed that one big difference between European and American art seems to be the influence of Heidegger. Until very recently, European artists never threw overboard these existential questions. Heidegger talked about life as preparing for the inevitability of death. That existential question is central. In the US, by the 60s the reality of death has just disappeared. Think of plastic surgery and the whole cult of youth—people do not really acknowledge that they are going to die. Warhol straddled the question very poignantly. On the one hand, he glamorized death with his paintings of car crashes and Marilyn Monroe. On the other hand, he used his camera and tape to make an undying record of every incident in his life.

KDJ: Warhol once did a portrait of you. Do you feel related to him or do you feel your work is related to his?

PH: I do. I mean—I grew up in New York. He was really an idol to me when I was young. But his legacy has certainly been taken up by wide variety of artists. One generation after another seems to focus on different aspects of his work. In my case, I relate to his strategies of repetition and his ideas about emotion. I think that Warhol really did see himself as a conduit, an entity through which other people's creativity and psyches flowed. I'm kind of oriented that way myself. Publishing *Index Magazine* for ten years was very much like that—putting people together and listening to their ideas.

I absorbed a similar viewpoint from the German sociologist, Norbert Elias. His great book is called *The Civilizing Process*. It's a social history of the West from the middle ages until the end of the ari-

stocratic era. In the preface to this book—and he is writing in the 1930s—he argues that consciousness doesn't reside in the individual, but rather in the group, and that there is no consciousness unless there is a group. It seems he was arguing against the individualization of the psyche that is the emphasized by Freud. I think that all this relates to the issue of existence—if consciousness resides in the group, where does existence reside?

KDJ: How do you see Elias' ideas in relation to your prisons and the isolation you spoke of earlier?

PH: The prisons and cells are definitely isolated containers. But what interests me is their interconnection. Obviously, I'm not saying the same thing as Elias, but as an artist, one takes in all of these viewpoints.

KDJ: So, for you it is more about what is in-between, between people, between these isolated containers?

PH: As a human being, feels of isolation or alienation, awareness of my interior state of mind, and my relationship to the world around me all come into it. I often think of the paintings as a conversation between being connected and not being connected.

KDJ: Is the connection also between the viewer and the painting?

PH: That is such a complicated question. It has been my experience that any reading of the work relating to what I have to say is rare. More often people get it in a kind of intuitive way. It is really only professional critics and writers who examine the work as we are doing now.



When my work first came on the scene, it was not uncommon for people to talk about these issues. Now that my work has entered the system, it is mostly judged aesthetically. The conversation mostly resolves around whether it is a good Peter Halley or a bad Peter Halley. It can be frustrating.

I think of my work as diaristic. I like to follow the change in the paintings over the course of time. It's a little crazy—I really use only three or four symbolic forms, and variations in the color. The fact that I've been rearranging these forms and reworking them for a period of over twenty-five years is interesting. When I look back, I can often see personal and political reasons for why the configurations changed.

KD: The approach to materials in your work seems close to Minimalism. Is that right?

PH: As a young artist, I felt that both Minimalism and Pop Art reflected a really democratic approach to art making. Artists had embraced commercial materials and techniques. It did not require any special skills to make a Donald Judd or an Andy Warhol. That was very important to me. It had to do with making art accessible—not just the viewing but the making of art. You and I, or anybody we know could take some bricks and make art with it. It was not a question of training or special genius or anything like that. My own work still depends on techniques that do not require a unique hand or special facture.

KD: You even use special paints—Day-glo and Roll-a-tex. Why do you use these materials?

PH: I use Day-glo because of the luminosity: they really are brighter than artist's pigments. That ties into what I just said about the democratic attitude, about how to make something. If you use Day-Glo paint, it's not so hard to make the color bright—it's not

the result of an expertise or finesse or anything like that. There has always been a lot of humor in my work. Warhol and the Pop generation were trying to reconsider the idea of what is easy and what is difficult. Why make it hard, when you can make it easy? That attitude resulted in real innovation.

At the same time, I could never accept the hermetic self-referential claims of Minimalism. Donald Judd, for example, said that the forms in his work didn't refer to anything, that they were in effect signifiers without signifieds. In the 80s, with the influence of Roland Barthes and others, the issue of the signifier all of a sudden became opened up again. A lot of my early work is the result of questioning Minimalism and re-opening Minimalist signifiers to point to society, to social space, etc. All of a sudden, squares could become prisons. To some extent this reconsideration of representation was the experience of a lot of artists of my generation.

KD: A few weeks ago I was in Paris where I saw one of your recent works. Because of the fluorescent colors, it is difficult to look at your paintings. The color dazzles your eyes. I was thinking about this in relation to what you once said, that you share with Henri Matisse "a desire to integrate the formal aspects of a picture and its symbolic content."

PH: With artists like Rothko and Newman and the painters and sculptors of the 60s, light was very much part of the conversation. I grew up with the notion that paintings create light, that picturing light was really important. As my work developed, I wanted to make paintings that created light, not natural light, but an artificial light. One usually thinks of a divine or sublime force as dazzling. So, if it's artificial light that dazzles, it's a little perverse in a way that I like.

KD: You work with a number of assistants in your studio. What effect does it have on your paintings to have other people work on them?

PH: It's true, nowadays I only work a little bit on the actual paintings. But the techniques and the way of painting them are mine.

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I'm also interested in how a lot of artists are working with the personalization of consumer culture. Like, choosing between a Prada and a Louis Vuitton handbag is said to give you personal identity. All these little consumer choices have become more and more important to the way people personally define themselves, in defining how one person is distinct from the next. So, I guess in my experience, the personal has been corrupted and has sort of disappeared.

KDJ: In 1984 you defined the concept of space as "a digital field in which are situated 'cells' with simulated stucco texture from which flow irradiated 'conduits.'" Taking this definition into account, you have spoken about numerous variations of space, such as social space, cellular space, simulated space, and geometric space. How—if at all—do they differ?

PH: In the early 80s, I decided that the space we live in is defined by compartments connected by predetermined pathways. I still believe that this is the dominant space in our society. In the 1990s, I started working with flowchart diagrams taken from psychology and computer science textbooks, which defined space in absolutely the same kind of way. My conclusion has been that this space was in fact first codified by structuralism in the early twentieth century. It is a way of connecting and organizing things—first categorizing and then creating connections between them.

It seemed very exciting to me to work with this paradigm. I don't think anybody has ever agreed with me about its importance. In the 90s, I felt that computerization was only intensifying this paradigm, because in the binary pathways of the digital world, it is really the only way you can do things. I felt that I was able to go back and forth between the mental space of the flowchart and physical space we live in—they were almost the same.

I also felt that the structural features of this space were almost hidden. One night in the early 80s, I found myself in a New York office building with an artist who was doing a project there. The building

had a marble lobby—and of course there weren't any water pipes or electric lines visible anywhere. But when we went down to the basement, all these connections were exposed right there on the walls and ceiling. It made a big impression on me that these functional connectors are always hidden. It seemed to me that it was a worthwhile enterprise to foreground this issue in my work.

To conclude, I would also emphasize that the space I'm interested in is human space, the space that humans construct. That also comes from what I understand about Foucault—that there is a limit to our understanding—what we can understand is limited to what we do as humans.

KDJ: Would you say your paintings are spaces themselves?

PH: Yes. I think of them as very thin low-relief. I like to emphasize textural signifiers like the Roll-a-Tex surfaces and the thickness of the stretchers. I'm interested in anthropometric signifiers as well—for the most part, I try to make paintings in which you can imagine a human being fitting inside the cell or prison.

I get a lot of criticism for the fact that my work does not change much. But these decisions about what to paint were arrived at after a number of years. My subject matter feels essential to me. There are a few artists who really challenge the idea that change is a positive thing—like Agnes Martin, or maybe even more so Carl Andre, who has said that he didn't want his work to change, that the time we live is so short that doing one thing is enough.

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This question of execution also touches on issues of mortality and existence. Sol Lewitt, for example, doesn't physically have to be around to make the work. His wall pieces can be remade long into the future after his death. Of course, classical music is like that as well. I often wondered if that was a part of Lewitt's thinking.

KDJ: Is that something you are considering yourself, to have your work made after your own death?

PH: No, not literally. But, I am invested in the notion that my work does not depend on gesture and touch. It's produced by the mind, not the body. As such, it's an idealist enterprise.

I do think that people make works of art because they are going to die, and because the works of art that they make will presumably stick around. You can trace the development of that idea in European history. Christian immortality shifted into gaining immortality through fame.

KDJ: In your essay, The Frozen Land, you wrote about art's ability to stop time. Do you see time as a human construction?

PH: I was always aware of Bergson's ideas about human segmentation of the natural fluidity time. I'm also interested in how truth is based on a moment in time in both traditional Western chiaroscuro painting and in photography. The portrayal in a chiaroscuro portrait and a photograph is essentially based on how things appear at one single moment. Then, with the symbolist generation in the late 1800s, truth became associated with the idea of 'essence'—that truth was not momentary, but based on a distillation of prolonged study and observation. Somebody like Matisse really did believe that he could portray someone as they were, outside of time.

KDJ: You have stated that in your work you "try to avoid any pre-1945 influences", but in this conversation you have referred several times to pre-1945 ideas that influenced you. What kind of influences does this statement refer to? How does this idea reflect your ideas of history and nostalgia?

PH: Jose Ortega y Gasset once said that to think is to exaggerate. I made that statement about influence in a specific context. In the 80s, Neo-Expressionism was so tied to a nostalgic vision of the early twentieth-century modernism. I was trying to bring the conversation back to a dialogue about contemporary issues.

KDJ: You refer a lot to other people's ideas and seem to speak about your own work indirectly. Why do you do this? Does that mean that the historical context is very important to your work? Is art for you mainly about a dialogue?

PH: I've always thought of myself as having a very fluid ego-boundary. In many ways, I think of my creativity as a conduit through which the ideas of different people flow. I identify particularly with Warhol in this regard.

KDJ: Prisons can be understood as spaces for isolation and contemplation or reflection. How does your idea of prisons or cells relate to Foucault?

PH: First of all, as a young artist thirty years ago, the ideas I encountered in post-structuralism were already familiar to me from the work of Warhol and Robert Smithson. I don't think critical writing invents or discovers what is going on as much as it defines current issues in rigorous academic language.

That said, what Foucault emphasized for me is that we should interrogate our own culture—that we cannot really understand anything beyond our own cultural experience. Foucault brings to an end the West's romance with anthropology and non-Western culture, which was so prevalent from the beginning of the colonial era though the 1970s.

Foucault is so meticulous about his sources. He digs into the archive, delving into all sorts of forgotten records and documents. And the only truth for him is what has been recorded in these documents. That's one important thing. The other is his embrace of his own subjectivity, his opposition to objectivity, and his self-awareness that everything he writes comes from his own psychology. He pretty much states that his own subjective interior reality becomes the basis for his understanding of history.

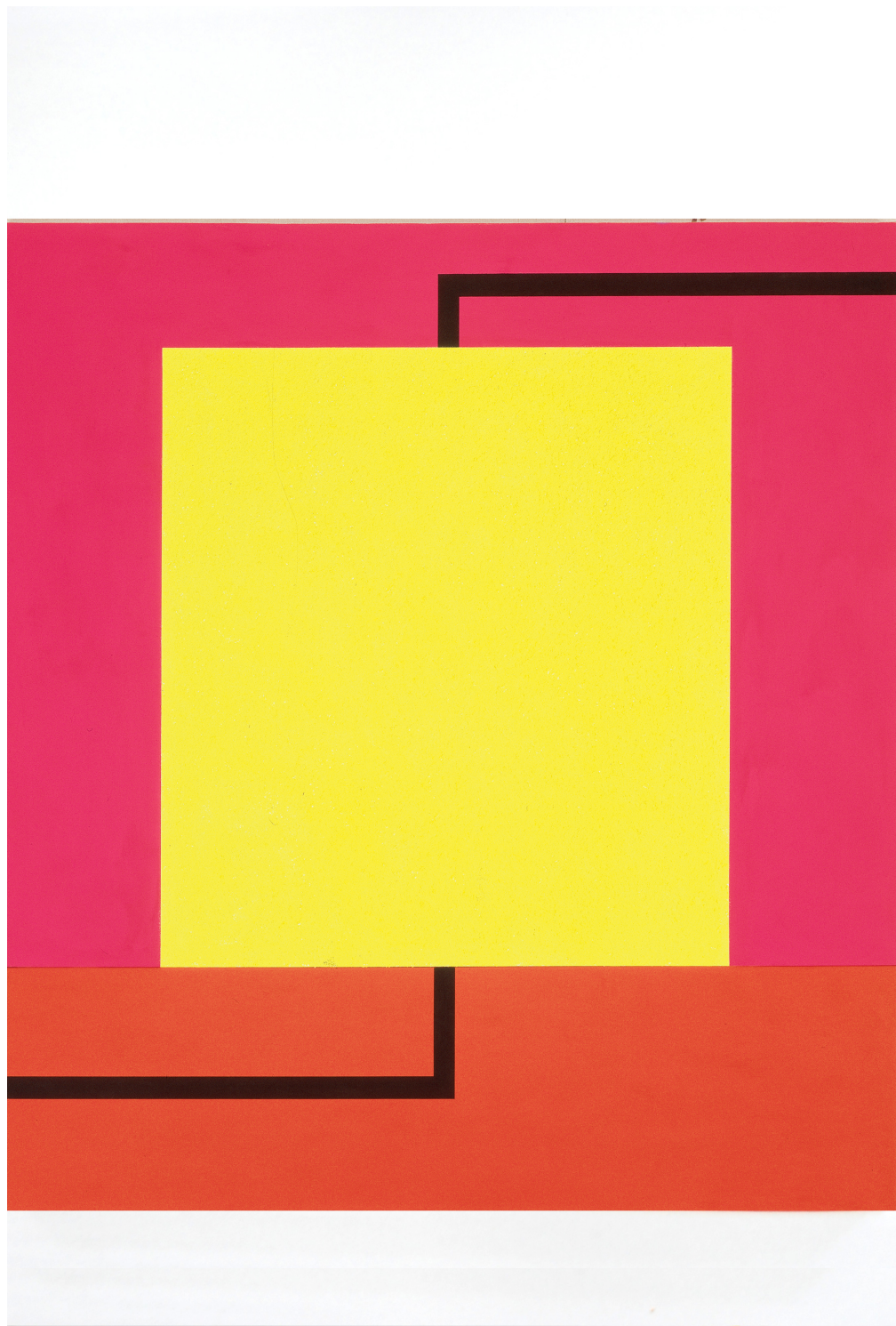
KDJ: How do you see that in relation in your own work? Do you see your work as personal?

PH: I think the idea of the personal is sort of crippling. The art that has influenced me—whether it be Warhol, Rothko, Robert Smithson or others—really de-emphasized the personal. But when Neo-Expressionism came along in the early 80s, it glorified the personal stance of the artists involved to such an extent that they were seen as heroic. The heroic artist is really a political issue. It devalues the worth of ordinary people who are not artists.

KDJ: Does the personal not play a role for you in your work? For example, your paintings can clearly be seen as the work of Peter Halley. Is it therefore not something personal?

PH: In our world, a successful creative work is individuated. If someone says about my work, "This looks like Frank Stella" they would be de-valuing my work, because it was not sufficiently individuated as Peter Halley. In the modern era, there is a tremendous value put on this individuation, which was not true in the pre-modern era.

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