

THE AESTHETIC

The aesthetic of the work of Christopher Ries is a complex synthesis of multiple references. These many references deal with space, time, energy and a compelling psychological relationship engendered by the beauty and presence of the object. In order to sort out the references in an understandable manner, this essay will be divided into three major parts. The first part will discuss the object in its environment and thereby deal with the three-dimensional quality of the work. The second part will discuss the surface planes, or the two-dimensional aspect of the work. And the third part will deal with the interior, or what will be defined as the four-dimensional quality of the work. By going from the extended exteriority to the surface and then to the interior, the essay will be following a viewer's perceptual process. In the end it will be shown how the various spatial and temporal qualities of the different dimensional levels combine to draw the viewer into a relationship that is at once introspective and firmly engaged with the work.

The sculpture of Christopher Ries exists fully in the round because each piece is site-responsive in all directions. There is an absolute engagement between the object and its setting because the optical glass contains and reflects the colors, shapes and movements throughout every-axis of its environment. This site-responsiveness is not merely an illustration of optical theory. Within the site relationship there is a mute power, a luminous quiet on the part of the sculpture that compels the viewer to enter into a relationship, to participate with the site and the piece. The viewer becomes a part of the setting that is at one with the sculpture. There can be no passive onlooker. Every viewer becomes an active participant in the world of the object. The entreaty to relate is so overpowering that participation occurs without effort. The viewer does not have to bring any references to this work. Consider, if you will, to what degree an understanding of Neo-Plasticism contributes to the relationship one has with an abstract painting by Piet Mondrian. Such complementary information is not necessary with Ries' work. An intense relationship extends to all people regardless of personal background.

At the three-dimensional level, as well as at the other two levels, abstraction is an issue; but the abstract quality of the sculpture is a positive impetus to relationship. The pieces are not restricted by their geometric nature because the geometry is not formal but organic. Unlike Minimal sculpture, for example, the purity and simplicity of works by Ries are not distant or impersonal. Piet Mondrian believed that abstract art creates more clearly felt, universal relationships.¹ Critic Clement Greenberg came closer to the point when he stated, "... abstractness may bring greater benefit to glass than to any other medium in terms of aesthetic results."² Abstractness exploits the spatial qualities of glass, such as transparency, translucency and reflection, that offer sheer visual enjoyment. The pristine beauty of the glass, heightened by its abstract form, does not simply render a technical statement. The supreme materiality of the piece transcends itself. It does not dominate, but rather triggers an intense relationship that goes beyond the literal.

In Ries' sculpture size is a factor of materiality. The Abstract Expressionist painter Mark Rothko once said that two feet of red is red, but eight feet of red is redder.³ A similar analogy can be made with glass. While other artists, for example Marian Karel of

Czechoslovakia and Karl Berg of West Germany, sculpt clear, colorless glass into geometrical forms, their pieces are rarely bigger than ten inches in any direction.⁴ Because Christopher Ries has fashioned many of his own tools and because he has an enabling contract with Schott Glass Technologies, his glass sculpture is larger than anything else of its kind: *Moonstone* (cat. no. 19), *Opposing Views* (cat. no. 5), *Clear Flame* (cat. no. 12), *Copper Cove 4* (cat. no. 15), *Victory* (cat. no. 16), *Motion* (cat. no. 26), *Chevron 1* (cat. no. 27) are all two feet or more in one direction. Ten inches of glass is glass, but two feet of glass is glassier. Size is one aspect of Ries' work that separates him from other glass sculptors. Size does not affect the quality of a piece, but it does heighten the impact of the quality. The larger the piece, the greater the impact in its setting.

A viewer/participator entering the setting merges at once into a quiet relationship with the piece. The setting is three-dimensional. The sculpture is three-dimensional. The time experienced observing the piece in its setting is real. It is successive: it has a past, a present and a future. It is time as we know it. The duration of the relationship at this level can be measured by a watch. Such quantification is not necessarily true at the other levels.

A tremendous fascination with the piece forces the viewer to continue the relationship. The mind searches and scans the object, noticing the glinting surfaces. The effect is hypnotic. The sparkle factor is not a cheap carnival flash. It is controlled by the configuration of the glass, and the viewer finds pleasure in this control. The diamond brilliance is not independent of the whole but contributes to it. The dazzle is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Light is not the primary issue. Christopher Ries does not sculpt light; he sculpts glass. At issue is what the material does with the light and how that affects a relationship. The reflection of light on the glass is constantly changing because the light, the piece, the viewing eye or any combination of the three are in motion. The glass either reflects or absorbs the light. Unlike what occurs with most sculpture, light reflecting on the surfaces does not define the mass but shifts it, because where there is no reflection there is transparency. This shifting happens in the interior as well as on the surface and compels attention. What will it do next? Wanting additional information, the viewer moves purposefully to gradual discovery. Moving, one finds that readings, interpretations, perceptions and sensations are instantaneous and can never come to rest. On the two-dimensional surface time is instantaneous. It is similar to the time element presented in an Impressionist painting. Both deal, however differently, with an instant of light. The flashing planes do not hold the spectator in front of the surfaces. On the contrary, the multiple planimetry of alternating light and transparency induces the viewer to look through the "windows," not *onto* the world as in the Albertian painting concept, but *into* another dimension.⁵

Contemporary artists working with glass often speak of a fourth dimension. For example, Marian Karel stated that "... in comparison with other art materials, it is only glass that is able to express, by its optical qualities, the fourth dimension."⁶ Christopher Ries agrees that glass incorporates a fourth dimension: "It is the optical illusion that goes beyond the physical dimensions."⁷ As one looks into a work by Christopher Ries, the interior with its controlled penetration of light reflects and refracts itself and its setting (including any viewer) in all directions. This complex spatial phenomenon has no known counterpart in

the ordinary world of three dimensions and so is referred to by glass artists as the fourth dimension. Artists working in materials other than glass have also sought to evoke the sensation of a fourth dimension. The most notable were the Cubist painters.⁸ Curiously, the interior aesthetic of works by Christopher Ries has more in common with Cubist painting than with any other art form. In the first decade of this century, Cubist painters depicted new spatial concepts not dependent upon three-dimensional perspective. Their paintings featured figural forms faceted in a variety of planes and angles seen from different points of view at the same time. Moreover, some of the facets were shaded, creating “shifting relationships that contribute to a general shimmering quality of ‘iridescence.’”⁹ When looking into a work by Ries, one sees a myriad of multi-faceted images which include the interior topology of the piece, the viewer and aspects of the setting. Isolating one of these elements, one might see, for example, parts of one’s own face from several points of view at the same time. All of the faceted elements are in a constantly shifting relationship because of movement and because the refractive quality of the glass causes the light to shade some facets while it brightens others, thus creating an interior depth that is at once real (because the sculpture is three-dimensional) and illusionistic (because the images are so broken up and appear to extend beyond the physical dimensions of the object). Moreover, the quality of the light creates an iridescent glow. It is this effect that, at least in part, allies Ries’ aesthetic more closely with Cubist painting than with Cubist sculpture. While Cubist sculpture engages a play of light on the faceted planes of fragmented figures, there is not the same “iridescence of form”¹⁰ because the opaque materials of Cubist sculpture do not effect the complex lighting variations as the painting does. The sculpture does not have “inner” sources of light, only exterior sources. In a 1948 discussion of lighting and Cubist painting, Winthrop Judkins comments on such things as “the possibilities of the expansion of the light source, the multiplication of light sources,... and the introduction of secondary illumination in the form of reflections from other objects.”¹¹ He could easily have been discussing a Ries sculpture. The difference, of course, is that in Cubist painting the lighting is illusionistic; in Ries’ sculpture it is actual.

The Cubists sought to depict a new reality, a higher, unseen fourth dimension through complex, non-Euclidean spatial abstractions.¹² Cubist sculpture was always secondary to Cubist painting in its attempt to depict a fourth dimension. It was easier to depict a fourth dimension on a two-dimensional plane than with a three-dimensional structure. The absence of illusion (and thus the possible suggestion of added dimensions) plagued any portrayal of the fourth dimension by sculptural three-dimensional solids.¹³ At the time of Cubist sculpture, roughly from 1909 to 1920,¹⁴ glass had yet to be considered a sculptural medium, and technology had yet to advance optical glass to near perfection. It is arguable that had the sculptural quality been apparent and the technology been available, Cubist sculptors would have reveled in glass. Curiously, Marcel Duchamp, who had a greater empirical understanding of non-Euclidean geometry than the other artists, ultimately chose to depict the fourth dimension using glass panes and mirrors.¹⁵ Christopher Ries uses glass with its mirrored reflections.

The physical transparency of Ries’ material is as important as the reflections. Moreover, it can be interpreted at the literal as well as the phenomenal level. At the literal level it is a material condition. Because of its optical purity, the glass, when absorbing light, becomes transparent and “disappears.” Since transparency alternates with reflections

there is a continually changing visual balance, a continually changing sense of depth as the material engages space in a fickle, illusive manner. The material condition, which allows one to see through the glass, also creates an illusory condition of now-you-see-it-now-you-don't relationships that renders a sense of mystery, a contradiction of spatial dimensions that contributes to the depiction of the fourth dimension. Cubist painters depicted transparency both as real or literal, and as phenomenal or seeming transparency.¹⁶ In the real sense a figure could be painted in such a manner that one seems able to see through it as though it were literally transparent. In the phenomenal sense space can be suggested so ambiguously that a fluctuating, equivocal depth characteristic of real transparency contributes to the sense of a fourth dimension. Literal and phenomenal transparency are extremely important to Ries' work as well as to Cubist painting because they allow, indeed encourage, the viewer to look *into* the work (literally with the glass, figuratively with the painting) and thus into another dimension. This depth of observation separates Ries' work from Cubist sculpture because one looks *at* Cubist sculpture, not *into* it. The sense of "looking into" is necessary for the ultimate sense of the "other," or fourth dimension.

The apprehension of time in the interior of Ries' sculpture is very different from that in Cubist painting. In Cubism there is a duality of time.¹⁷ First, there is the real passage of time, or successive time. Referred to as "space-time" it results from the artist physically or mentally "moving around an object to seize it from several successive appearances."¹⁸ The second order of time is "simultaneity," or the juxtaposition of images seen from different points of view at once. It can be argued that both succession and simultaneity are a part of the interior aesthetic of Ries' art. After all, there is a simultaneous juxtaposition of images, and movement around the object offers successive appearances. However, Ries' interiors go beyond this duality of time to an absolute void of time, or timelessness. Unlike Cubist painting, the glass sculpture permits both a perceptual and conceptual view of oneself. One may sense the fourth dimension in Cubist painting, but there is no literal view of oneself, nor is there any hint of personal identity in the added dimension.¹⁹ To understand how viewing oneself creates timelessness, we must further explore the relationship between the self and the interior.

The beholder hypnotically drawn into a work by Ries finds great pleasure in the illusions. In two-dimensional painting, expectation creates the illusion;²⁰ but in the glass, illusion creates expectation and compels movement around the piece. As the viewer moves, the myriad of readings move in a balanced parallax of reflection, refraction and transparency. The balance is not accidental. It has been determined by the artist, and it offers peaceful movement as one reading is transformed into another.²¹ Unlike Cubist painting, Ries' interiors do not compel the viewer to compensate mentally for lack of movement or space because the least motion by the viewer becomes motion within the observed object. This movement in a complexity of space demands a focused attention that intensifies to a hypnotic stare. We find comfort in staring. It helps us assimilate a multitude of impressions at the same time that it blocks distractions arising from our surroundings. It eliminates the collective or group experience as it conducts meaning and emotion in a very personal sense. By staring, one engages in a highly personalized relationship with the object.

Staring is anything but unusual in our culture.²² We stare at traffic lights and into microwave ovens. We stare at cinema and television screens. We stare at computer display monitors. Ries' sculpture, therefore, invites a mode of behavior to which we have become habituated in our electronic culture.

Staring into the sculpture, one senses one's self both perceptually in the mirrored images and conceptually in the intensely personalized relationship. Other sculptors have sought this effect. For example, in discussing her immensely successful Viet Nam War memorial, Maya Ying Lin states, "The point is to see yourself reflected in the names."²³ Anyone who has ever stood before Lin's black granite memorial will tell of hypnotic, intensely personal, introspective sensations very similar to those evoked by Ries' aesthetic. Staring into his work, one stares into one's self.

If we live in a culture that promotes staring, we also live in a culture that promotes the self. It is a culture attuned to the individual. It promotes identity and self analysis through psychology and psychiatry. It is a culture where books about self-help and dieting become best sellers. It is a culture of video "workouts," and personalized ad campaigns such as "This Bud's for you," and L'Oreal's "I'm worth it." It is a culture that begot the "me" generation. The self becomes the iconography in Ries' sculpture. When looking into the object, the beholder is looking at an illusionistic extension of self. There is a holistic assimilation with the object. The glass sculpture connects with and forces the exploration of the personal psyche. Within the psyche, reality and illusion converge and suspend temporal order. The framework of time is non-existent in a realm that is above the physical world. There is a complete absence of time. The temporal element in the interior of Ries' sculpture is timelessness.

The aesthetic of the glass sculpture of Christopher Ries is beautifully simple in form and seductively complex in expression. The viewer is first attracted to the three-dimensional object at one with its setting. The experience is real and pleasurable, and time is successive. Next, the two-dimensional, faceted glint of surface planes reflects a single moment in time and draws one's gaze to the interior.²⁴ The interior offers a fourth dimension of illusive space similar to that achieved in Cubist painting. In Ries' interiors and in Cubist painting there are a deliberate oscillation of appearances, a studied multiplicity of readings, and an iridescence of form.²⁵ While the time element in both is successive and simultaneous, the glass sculpture adds a sense of timelessness through an interchange with the psyche. In short, in the Ries aesthetic one goes from the third dimension, to the second dimension, to the fourth dimension; from successive time, to an instant of time, to suspended time. One cannot visually read all of the temporal and spatial layers at once; however, none of the layers sink below the threshold of awareness. There is a sense to it all as the temporal and spatial orders converge in the experience of "self." While the sculpture deals with the inside as well as the outside of volume, it also deals with the "inside" as well as the outside of the viewer. The sculpted pieces are not simply tributes to mood and movement. They are not just icons of light. They are metaphors of the personal psyche. They become one with the "self," and there is great beauty in the relationship.

1. For a detailed discussion of his beliefs see Piet Mondrian, *Plastic Art and Other Essays*, New York, 1945.
2. Clement Greenberg, "Glass As High Art," *Glass Art Society Journal*, 1984-1985, p. 15.
3. Laurence Alloway, "Talking with William Rubin: Like Folding Out a Hand of Cards," *Artforum*, November 1974, p. 51.
4. It should be emphasized that this discussion of size is about conterminous pieces of optical quality glass and excludes sculpture of different types of glass such as pyrex, plate or float glass and sculpture that is not made of one piece, but rather many pieces glued or somehow placed together.
5. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) was a noted Italian Renaissance architect who wrote several influential treatises on painting. He insisted that a painting should be like a window onto the world. This concept held sway in painting for many centuries.
6. Ferdinand C. Hampson and Thomas J. Boone, *25 Years: Glass as an Art Medium*, Habatat Galleries, Lathrup Village, Michigan, 1987, p. 81.
7. An interview with Christopher Ries by the author, July 21, 1987.
8. For a detailed discussion of Cubism and the fourth dimension see the outstanding scholarship of Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, Princeton University Press, 1983.
9. Henderson, p. 58.
10. Winthrop Judkins, "Toward a Reinterpretation of Cubism," *The Art Bulletin*, December 1948, p. 276.
11. Judkins, p. 274.
12. Euclid was a Greek mathematician who, around 300 B.C., set forth a system of geometry based on a three-dimensional world. His concept of the three-dimensional world held sway for over 2,000 years.
13. Henderson, pp. 8-9.
14. For a discussion of Cubist sculpture see Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 103-115.
15. Henderson, pp. 150-157.
16. For a detailed discussion of this point see Colin Rowe, "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal (with Robert Slutzky)," *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, 1976, pp. 159-183.
17. For detailed discussions of time in Cubism see Henderson, pp. 89-93; and Judkins, p. 270, footnote No. 2.
18. Henderson, p. 90.
19. This is not to imply that Cubism is lesser because it does not perceptually and conceptually reflect identity, just that it is different.
20. For a discussion of conditions of illusion in painting see E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Princeton University Press, 1972, pp. 203-206.
21. It should be noted that there are more than a hundred thousand readings in each piece. Consider, for example, a glass sphere circumscribed with longitudinal and latitudinal lines at every degree of its 360 degree circumference. Consider a Ries sculpture within this sphere. Looking at the sculpture from every one of the 129,600 points of intersection on the sphere gives a different reading. Moreover, the sphere is only one distance from the sculpture. Using the same cross points at different distances gives different readings.
22. This point was first made to the author by glass artist Eric Hilton in a lecture entitled, "Inner and Outer: Timeless Patterns of Influence," delivered at the Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, N.Y., during the *Twenty-Third Seminar On Glass*, October 22, 1983.
23. "An Interview with Maya Lin," *Art in America*, April 1983, p. 123.
24. It should be recognized that not all of Ries' sculpture is faceted. For example. *Moonstone* (cat. no. 19) and *Golden Egg 3* (cat. no. 25) are egg-shaped. However, the viewer's progress is the same and the convex reflections within these pieces offer a curved, non-Euclidean space. Because this essay is a general one it does not deal with any of the objects specifically, but in all cases the aesthetic is the same.
25. See Judkins, p. 276, for a specific listing of these three aspects of Cubism.