

Demarcation by the Human Hand

Kyle Herranen's *Parergon*

Richard Halliday, a now-retired instructor at the Alberta College of Art and Design, was infamous for his zeal in tearing off portions of student artwork during critiques. He would stare meaningfully at a painting or a drawing, holding his chin and his great grey beard. Then he would walk forward and, for instance, tear the work in half, dropping the discarded portion on the ground. "There," he would say, "it's better now."

And he was right, always. Maddeningly, his interventions into the work never failed to improve on what had been there before. In a violent, Rinzai Zen way, Halliday was teaching us about the borders of the work of art and the need to cut off that which is not part of what the artwork needs to be.

It is the very nature of this border that Kyle Herranen is interrogating in his latest work, a set of wooden high-craft frames entitled *Parergon*.

Parergon, we see by examining its archaic Greek roots, indicates secondary work in support of primary work; it is the work beside the Work. Without the primary Work, it is assumed, the *parergon* would not exist... or at least, would not have been called into existence originally. It is the container, supporting the fragile work of art--the work of art relies upon it physically while the frame relies upon the status of the work of art.

In common usage, however, the seemingly parergonal frame effects a mutually-beneficial parasitism; it hosts a number of images over the course of its life, rather than the other way around. Ours is an age of technical images made through apparatuses rather than what Vilem Flusser would call "pictures," or images made by hands and reality.¹ Chief among these is the snap-shot, and as such we are awash in a sea of quick images and disposable visual iterations. Viewing our society generically, we can easily make the claim that the images produced or purchased for display in our homes are rarely more monetarily valuable--and sometimes less sentimentally valuable--than the frames which contain them. This has become so commonplace that it is possible to find, in any department store, a range of digital LCD-based "frames" which are capable of cycling through several images *per minute*.

The implication in Herranen's title that the frame is secondary work is further troubled by the very fact that the frames in this series *are* the artwork(s). One can assume therefore that Herranen's use of *parergon* as the title for this body of work is ironic. Having been subverted through their near-emptiness from the generic use-context of a frame--that of holding, protecting, or supporting an artwork--they take on the habits of 3-dimensional sculpture and discard the suggestion of the art-world primacy of 2-dimensional imaging; they don't, after all, frame anything but other parts of themselves. To take this further, a viewer could imagine that Herranen is ridiculing the power of the image by removing it from its traditional home and allowing its container to spill inward, infiltrating what has been a form of portable sacred space through the history of Western Art.

¹ Flusser, Vilem. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Reaktion: New York. 2000.

This is done more explicitly in some of the works than in others; a prime example of this is *Untitled #2*--the titles in this series themselves both a nod-to and a jibe-at art-world pretensions--which features a series of straight, thin stripes making up the frame as well as the crosspiece that interrupts and divides it. Perhaps intended exclusively as a joke on modernism--“stripe painting” having a very special and distinctly modernist place in the hearts of Canadians ever since the National Gallery’s purchase of *The Voice of Fire*--this piece ends up undermining both modernism and craft. If the argument of the piece is that high modernism is dismissive of or disregards entirely the craft of the frame (or its very existence) for formalism, this work seeks to appropriate and insult formalism for the benefit of craft. This is reversed, however, by the mere fact of the formal beauty of these structures. When combined in this way, the two oppositional tendencies of high-modern formalism and finely-tuned manual labour resonate against each other, generating a dissonance that makes us unsure of just where Herranen stands within the binary. After all, his use of wood is so precise and geometric that one wonders whether he, like Andy Warhol, longs to be a machine. The smooth planes and high-gloss surfaces of the work imply the dismissal of the manual as a desirable aesthetic, in much the same way that modernist masking-tape paintings dismissed the painterly traces of the human hand. Further, Herranen employs an honesty to materials through his tactics of making wood beautiful and memorable by virtue of its being wood, suggesting a kinship with the Arts and Crafts movement of design. And if the Greenbergian model of modernist praxis required that painting be about paint, it is not a far leap to assume also that modernist woodworking should be about wood.²

Analogously, these works are frames about framing. They do not frame a two-dimensional image or a vista but instead sit within a space as three-dimensional objects with absent referents; they are metaphors not only for actual, practical frames but for all metaphorical implications of framing--the contextualization, situation, location, demarcation and exaltation of that-thing-worth-looking-at. And because the situation, borders, and contexts of the work of art have been brought to our attention already by this work, we would be remiss not to notice that the meta-containers Herranen has supplied us with are themselves placed within a container--a container with the specific and loaded implications that the art gallery is heir to.

I have long held that the craft of a work is what is put into it, and that the art is what is left out. I didn’t imagine that I would see that realized as both literally and metaphorically as it has been in *Parergon*; Herranen has kept the craft and omitted the art but then placed the result in an art gallery, and has thereby merged both into a paradoxical nebulous whole. This work therefore embodies art in the postmodern, ironically employing the handmade and personal while enacting a form of mass-culture, where meaningful distinctions between “high” and “low” forms of culture are thrown perpetually into discord.

Lee Henderson, August 2007

² “Kyle Herranen - *Parergon*: Featuring works in hard maple and black walnut” (*Parergon* exhibition advertisement, 5th Parallel Gallery, University of Regina) --notice that the subtitle for this exhibition of work points out the specific woods used in the construction of its component pieces, suggesting that the woods themselves are central.