

On the Alien Substance of the Frame

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"For too long art history has focused on what appears within the frame to the practical exclusion of what surrounds it. [...] But is it even possible to say what a frame does?"

Paul Duro¹

1. Elements of the Protocol

In an ongoing serialized work, the interdisciplinary collaborative duo Ellis and Parker von Sternberg (EVSPVS) rely on a fairly generic template of rules for each iterative production: (1) a set of images are selected and delivered to a framer, also selected, and (2) the framer (or in this case, the anonymous artisan providing waged, technical labor) is then asked to select from a smaller set they respond to with a frame, in agreement to be complicit in the project where such decisions are entirely of their choosing. One could here be forgiven were they to deduce that these works are about frames and framing. This would at least be partially correct as far as EVS has expressed their collaborative interest is oriented towards "how information on artworks is imparted by something entirely outside the artwork" (von Sternberg, 2023, 2) as a space where enframing is a structural condition of appearance and interpretation. This suggestion is supported by a further one EVS makes that "the image always supports the frame, not the other way around. The images are accidental in relation to their frames." (35).

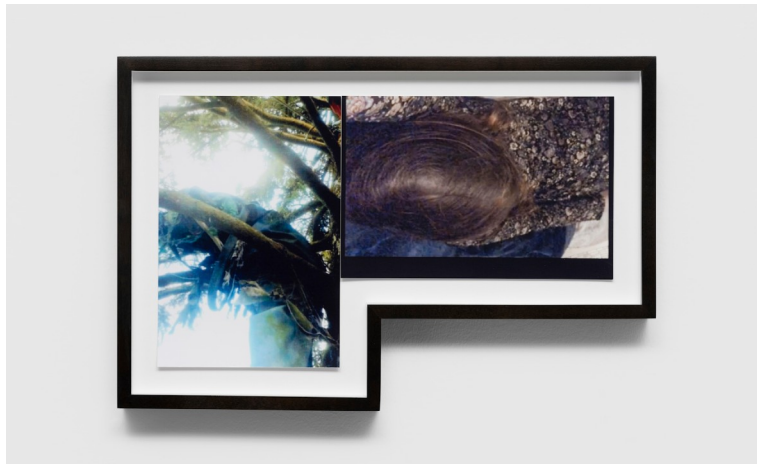
Finally, as far as the gallery catalogue is conditioned to minimally articulate it, "[a]ll aesthetic decisions for the frames, including count, dimensions, shape, materials, orientation, matting, and choice of images from the set, are chosen by the framers without consulting the artists. Titles are taken from the work order ID numbers used by the frame shop." This might be caricatured as a celebration of the socially co-created object were it not for the implication of a colder logic that reverses the order of aesthetic judgment back onto the process of exhibition and preparation. The vector of craft, even if it is only one destination for the procedure, at a specific place in the distribution of images and works, is one that operationalizes synthetic and artificial elements requisite for assembling aesthetic objects as technical appearances, taking on all the semiotic marks of a product.

2. Mappings and Functions

Each point of transmission in the iterative realization of this work establishes a relay of inferential networks and patterns that allow for a number of things to become legible. We could, for instance, choose to see a precursor in conceptual art's interest in institutional framing. There is also the historical problem of the material, and the technically proficient artisanal production of the diversity of frames that establish value and encode information as knowledge. Inverted, there can

¹ Paul Duro, "From Work to Frame," *Art History* 43 (2020): 221, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12488>.

also be discerned the dimensions in which aesthetics and art discourse actualize a relation to the frame as *supplemental* and in doing so, mark a void at the center of the artwork's immanence. This contingency in turn has received familiar but non-extensive commentary, such as that early in the 20th century by Georg Simmel ([1902] 1994) concerning a frame's role in "assisting and giving meaning to [the] inner unity of the picture" (12), a unity that is supplemented by the frame and its mediations of "separating and connecting" (17). Artistic modernism, as much as contemporary art, made the critical viewing public acquainted with the idea that the frame is "in question", that the image plane is a mediation with the edge, border, territory, etc. It has further become a methodological obligation that contemporary art be understood and interpreted through a "global frame". What is more, since the frame began its tenure as a consistent trope of artistic modernism² there has been a subsequent proliferation of artistic practices that claim to "exceed the frame" or operate "outside the frame". Yet if one were to say that the frame is therefore a normative convention this would not be to state the obvious, since, in appearing obvious, it obscures the degree to which, as art historian Paul Duro observes, "our present-day belief in the supplementarity of the frame is as historically conditioned as the indivisibility of frame and artwork was to the early Renaissance" (Duro 2020, 223).



Ellis & Parker von Sternberg, 222263A, black stain maple frame, Optium AR UV Museum acrylic, digital C print, 25 cm x 17.25 cm, 2022, all images courtesy of the artists and King's Leap Fine Arts LLC.

Such a belief is its own machine for the production and reproduction of instances and interventions that include familiar cases of division, support, separation, or enclosure coextensive with liminality, erosion, instability, decay, or the exchange of center for periphery. This torsion between inside and outside, about what is 'accidental' or perhaps 'supplemental' to artworks, was notably articulated for Anglophone readers with the appearance in English of Jaques Derrida's essay "The Parergon" in the pages of *October* in 1979, later collected with related reflections as *The Truth in Painting* (1987). The central theoretical hinge is a polemic with this concept of the *parergon* as frame and supplement as deployed by Kant in the third *Critique*. Duro, as one of the few scholars concerned with a prioritization of frames rather than pictures, provides ample empirical evidence to motivate a *rehabilitation* of the concept of parergon untethered to "its current near-univocal characterization as a synonym for a frame" (2019, 23). Their contribution enables us to see how, in their broader

² "The review of twentieth-century critical literature leads inevitably from questions of formalism within the image to questions of the way the frame is assumed to bound and contain the image and grant it defining identity. This assumption found its strongest platform within the rhetoric developed to justify and explain abstraction—which was intent on establishing a basis for a visual mode which did not depend upon anything outside the picture plane." Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism*, 63

historical configurations, parerga refer to what is neither strictly inside nor outside the artwork but which nonetheless condition how the work appears, how it is judged, and even what counts as the work itself. Even while this conditioning is made explicit with Derrida, it lacks the biting *edge* of Duro's historical examples.

For Meyer Schapiro (1971)—whose ‘dialogue’ with Martin Heidegger regarding a revered painting of a pair of shoes is a main axis for Derrida—parerga are those “non-mimetic elements of the image-sign” that have as condition of appearance (before they themselves condition appearance) the prior emergence in human history of the “smooth prepared field” (9) that Western culture has come to regard as a given. Indeed, as a repository for images and inscriptions, the frame and the space it designates are nothing if not *conventional* in their utility for recording and transmitting the abstractions of representation. Yet, as Schapiro rightly points out, its historical appearance is far removed from the ‘open field’ of cave walls and would have instead coincided with a *technical* stage in the development of sapient cognition where such elements give way to a material and compositional syntax that can potentially obtain semantic value. At such an evolutionary locale, parerga cannot be extricated from the reproduction of performance and behavior as an operational and supplemental *techné* to cognition itself (see Thwaites 2017).

This ‘parerga in the expanded field’ gives license to insist there is something else at work in EVSPVS’s serialized images-in-frames that is not intelligible if we remain at the level of their protocol. Even if we are to believe the images are accidental in relation to this material support of display, their selection was not. Each one has been sourced from gray market paywalled website forums dedicated to the circulation of crime scene photography, whether it be smut, snuff, or legal evidence, where there is a distinct base of users about whom we could say all share peculiar *forensic interests*. As found images, each one has already been seen and even *put to use* as a particular typology of representation solicited concerning their potential to function “as a conduit of information relating to the condition of the scene” (Porter 2011, 40). Given that it is the ‘destiny’ (or fate?) of works of art to become documents, often as the end results of museological processes, this staging is not without significance. EVSPVS would insist that, when it comes to works of art, everything you need to understand them with respect to how they came about is there if you know how or what to look for. Analogously, there is the *case* of just how a crime scene when properly analyzed might reveal everything relevant to understanding the crime. Derrida calls attention to the way Kant’s third *Critique* itself mobilizes a “police discourse” around the parergon: it is cast as something suspicious, possibly corrupting, that must be kept in its proper place. Like the status of the forensic photograph as witness, status as artworks depends on institutional maintenance if not first the mediation of a market to assess what counts as admissible, reliable, and probative.

According to an early reading of Derrida from Craig Owens (1979), who incidentally was also the first translator of Derrida’s essay that appeared in French the previous year, it is a prerequisite of aesthetic judgment that it be causally entangled in what for Derrida is a consistent theme regarding parerga as supplement in a “permanent complicity of Western aesthetics with a certain theory of the sign” that designates their “compensatory role” (43). This ‘set-up’ logically entails a series of questions for Owens: “what if it could be demonstrated that philosophy, in order to deal with art at all, has always dealt with it as a semiotic phenomenon. That the fundamental presuppositions that organize aesthetic discourse are identical with those upon which semiotics is based? That the visual arts have continually been subordinated to language, and that every hierarchy of the arts is based

on linguistic criteria? That semiotics itself is in fact (an extension of) aesthetics?” (42-3). It would here be more advantageous to speak of these framed images by calling them what they are: just as the image is accidental in relation to the frame, so is the classification of these objects as artworks secondary to their material and conceptual configuration as *technical objects*. This does not entail extending into the field of interpretation in which an object ‘does something’ but instead as that with which someone or something else does something; that which is *utilized*. Images are examples for forensics and evidence to say the least (insofar as such images, information, or data can be admissible) and within normative constraints, any images can become examples for art. It might even be germane to suggest that in configuring this serialized work, EVSPVS are interested in presenting nothing other than *examples of art*. This could prove a salient conceptual envelope within which to think about this work or works—which is to say, to critique it/them, and by entailment as EVSPVS note (or at least as EVS does by themselves), to give way to ‘criticality as a form of complicity with suspicion.’



Ellis & Parker von Sternberg, 24.1305.A, 24.1305.C, digital C print, aluminum, Optium AR UV Museum acrylic, 33.02 x 24.13 cm, 29.21 x 22.86 cm, 2025

As concerns what we are referring to as the artwork, or the forensic and distributed image, their institutionally or commercially sanctioned presentation as documents or exhibition image-objects encompasses a variety of social, economic, legal, cultural, and interpretive mechanisms (all of which are *technical*) for limiting, delimiting, and defining their appearance or their transmission of knowledge, none of which could be guaranteed. This helps us think about how forms, objects, and practices that might appear secondary, supportive, or indeed *supplemental* in fact actively shape the social and cultural conditions in which meaning and authority are produced and where material practices intersect or form tangents with normative orders. The reason that it is difficult to localize or discern such contours, procedures, and operations has much to do with the widespread adoption of *aesthetic judgment* by a generalized and compliant connoisseur of images that have learned, after Kant, to maintenance an amnesia about their place in such judgments. However, in the reading that Peter Fenves (2008) has given this problem, this amnesia, although they do not refer to it as such, is a symptom of explicating what aesthetic judgment entails for cognition at the expense of jettisoning techne-terms from the third *Critique*, because Kant “only makes sure that it will not be taken for what it says, namely that the fundamental problem of aesthetics is neither that of “natural beauties” nor that of “fine art” but, rather, of *technical appearances*. These appearances do not call for aesthetic reflection. Rather, they call apparatuses in and through which they can take place as such.” (101)

But the phenomenological problem returns. Isn't the framing, the *point of view*, something that performs for, or acts on, the viewer? Is it possible to elicit, through mimesis and imitation or mimicry, the response of recognition anticipated by the "smooth prepared plane"? To respond appropriately to such inquiries is to assume the knowledge of why, then, the images are "accidental" in relation to the framing that domesticates the image under a concept. In their essay, "The Politics of Framing in the Late Nineteenth Century", John H. Pearson (1990) reminds us that "[d]esire for lasting control of the art work as a semiotic field and an economic good has been long shared by painters and writers, who usually lose control of their canvases and narratives once the process of creation yields to the process of consumption"(15). In one of their examples, still relevant today, we can extract a lesson from the antagonisms between 17th c Dutch artists and the artisan-framers accused of "interposing an alien presence" because the frames "embed the artist's composition in another craftsman's supplemental translation or interpretation of the framed work" (16).

I want to suggest here that these historical antagonisms and the desire to invert them, to map back onto the structure itself the rules of its own operation, as recursive procedure, is what EVSPVS are interested in—that there is no starting point in a process of creation, given that no matter how it is handled concerning art, everything is just a process of consumption and waste, subtraction, addition, division; of transaction and theft, etc. For Pearson, *pace* Schapiro, the frame is a property line or city wall that relocates authority for artists who were interested in crafting an educated audience beholden to their goods (in all of the colonality implied by that). Where the frame could be seen either as "an infection of the composition with alien concerns" or a "rejuvenation of the semiotic field" (29). There is an inescapable range of evidence that the only relatively recent category of artistic subjectivity is a constructed form coextensive with an institutional methodology for crafting the *reception of work* as technical abstraction that valorizes art through the cultivated audience's invisible form of labor. We might refer to this in a manner after Jonathan Crary (1992) as a *technique of the observer*, albeit with a deeper history prior to the 19th c as their analysis assumed, since it extends the work beyond the appearance of objects in the space of exhibition into a 'relative elsewhere' of contracts, written and spoken agreements, interpretations, and norms that, insofar as such appearances are concerned, might seem external to works of art when in fact they structurally determine their ontology.



Ellis & Parker von Sternberg, 2201258A, cherry frame, fabric-wrapped backing and fillets, museum glass, digital C print, 24.77 x 29.84 cm, 2022



Ellis & Parker von Sternberg, 24.1305.B, digital C print, aluminum, Optium AR UV Museum acrylic, 24.13 x 33.02 cm, 2025

We could refer to this as the artwork's general "conceptual schema", a terminology Derrida extracts from Kant as prerequisite for aesthetic experience "in order to have at one's disposal a *Begriffsmechanik* that nothing can resist" (65). It is of a kind of *vectorial assessment* that persuades Derrida to suggest that "a critical and systematic and typological history of framing seems possible and necessary" (77-8). (Derrida is here explicitly orienting his argument vis-a-vis Schapiro with respect to a non-mimetic syntax and to the stressed *totality* of Jean-Claude Lebensztejn's writings). It is, as might be expected, a matter of prosthesis, detailed at the outset of "Parergon" that attempts to remind us concerning aesthetic judgments that "its models, its concepts, its problems have not fallen from the skies, they have been constituted according to determinate modes at determinate moments. This set forms a system, a greater logic and an encyclopedia within which the fine arts would stand out as a particular region. The *Agrégation de philosophie* also forms a history and a system" (18)³.

Much later in *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida reflects on the cartouche as a functional form more typically familiar as the framed encoding in early modern maps of metadata that, as parergonal embedding, "designates the sort of artificial model which already proceeds from a *techne*. The model, the example, is, then, an artifact, a referent constructed, sometimes wholesale, instructed, a fabricated structure." (195). This artifact is, moreover, the type of supplemental perversion manifested as a symptom of the artwork's internal torsion—a non-memetic syntax, linguistic or not—and the appearance of "writing articulated onto the exhibition" (222). It is just shy of being made explicit and is everywhere implied: the cartouche is the stillborn and bastard wall text, the press release, the critical essay.

3. Conclusion: An Unstable Economy of Reliance

What are we looking at that is so uncertain inside of the certainty of the frame? This essay has advocated for the mobilization of the parergon not as a mere 'supplement' that participates and advocates for an artwork's immanence, but as an appropriate conceptual armament for comprehending the embedded and extended entailments that qualify, legitimate, and condition works of art to begin with. In Duro's estimation, "the expanded parergon offers us the possibility of seeing a value beyond that of its relation to the frame or border, and one that informs on protocols and norms that form the basis of art theory in both antiquity and the early modern period" (2019, 31). Schapiro's suggestion that such protocols and norms are deeply embedded in human history as evidence of *technical sapience* offers a further expanse, possibly even a horizon. It allows us to consider how patterns, models, and frames (all manner of parerga) have in another sense been of recent interdisciplinary interest for an area of focus from cognitive anthropology, already three decades in, with commitments and alignments invested in defending the notion of "cultural models" (see Bennardo, De Munck, and Chrisomalis 2024). Normative before being descriptive, cultural models function very much like conceptual schemas. They are shared cognitive structures that allow individuals in a culture to interpret, predict, and act in order to remain aligned with the interpretive orders of diverse communities. This is precisely the normativity of the frame: a cultural model frames experience, filters salience, and organizes ahead of itself in sapient capacities for planning what can be "seen" or "thought" in a given context. Cultural models are cognitive parerga. They are neither simply inside the mind nor outside it, but shared framing devices that make interpretation possible and, in doing so, govern it.

³ Derrida's implicit reference to Hegel here is not lost.

In short, what we step into when considering this serialized work is the replication, reiteration, and reproduction of the space(s) of consideration: the model as product; a reliable product that solicits reproduction. It is an appropriately *dirty underside* like those of soiled shoes where a normative expectation to encounter authenticity is designed instead—or reverse engineered—to reveal the methodological pathos of a phenomenology in the technical appearances submitted to and for aesthetic judgments. “*Verlässlichkeit*” is a word Derrida selects from Heidegger for what it entails as that “by way of which” in the framing, tightening of representation, can enact a profoundly disciplinary force, since representation must come from agreement and commitments. If we can agree on the product, then we know that “you can count on the product. The product is reliable. It is useful only if we can trust in its reliability” (Derrida, 2020, 348). This word, given its entailments, presents “a translation difficulty which cannot be treated as incidental” (355). Derrida notes it may also be translated as ‘solidity’, yet none of its possible meanings disclose what, exactly, we have a trustworthiness or dependability on.

If we follow Duro’s advice it would be clear that there is no necessity to this arrangement, even if *pace* Schapiro, it was necessary there be technical cognition. As the lessons from historical epistemology make clear, as with the encoding of linear perspective into visual perception as the conceptual apparatus of a “post-biological function” (see Wartofsky 2012), parerga are only a contingent historical appearance just like the “smooth prepared field”. That we have come to count on art to reveal anything to us from *within the work*—that is, whatever is disclosed inside the borders of the image where they meet the borders of the frame—is as accidental as the images and a dupe from philosophy. Artworks call for a kind of reliance, yet that very reliance is itself unreliable, always supplemented, destabilized, mediated, and precisely because as Fenves notes, what is really called on is a technical mediation prior to being able to rely on anything.

The *cartouche* can be directly or indirectly embedded. “[E]very title is itself a cartouche, caught in the (parergonal) structure of a cartouche” (Derrida 2020, 236). The invoice number from the framer logs, catalogs, and names the work: 2200752A. The recursions form a semiotic matryoshka doll since not all parerga are cartouches but every cartouche is a parergon and all parergons are models, one of which (one stop along the way) is “black stain gloss maple frame, Optium AR UV Museum acrylic”. Concerning the “expressive frame” of the cartouche, Chet Van Duzer (2023) has conducted a remarkable study not unaware of Derrida where they proceed to uncover these early modern inscriptions as meta-, para-, and also “inescapably anti-cartographic” since “they occupy part of the cartographic space and cloak it from our view” (44). There is no need to reiterate the extrapolation of “institutional drapery” from this that provides the name of the king, the artist, the donor, the date, the attribution—whatever makes the otherwise anonymous visible while obscuring things from visibility.

One place we see the cartouche stylistically mimicked and transposed, even quite literally for similar purposes, is in the comics form. It here has been used historically in the exact same way as its appearance in cartography to state relevant metadata about authorship, territory, plots, and other information while also becoming a design element for enframing the comics panel, itself already a frame enframed by the ‘hyperframe’ of the page (see Groensteen 2017). If contemporary art has an analogous hyperframe, it is in the division of the site of the liberal artistic subject’s studio from the space of manual and technical labor, a structure replicated in the contemplative space of exhibition (on this history, see Beech 2020). In its complicity with “writing articulated onto the exhibition”, the

cartouche is both parasitic and corrosive at the same time it is additive to the cultural models germane to understanding art. Is history corrosive to meaning? It certainly prohibits the appreciation of images in any other *frame* than that with which they are operationalized as *works of art* that make ample use of exemplification to stand-in as examples of something that is “very awful and complex” (EVS 2023, 12).



Ellis & Parker von Sternberg, 2200752A, black stain gloss maple frame, Optium AR UV Museum acrylic, digital C print, 17.46 x 22.54 cm, 2022

This remains just one salient feature of the pattern. In Eva Schürmann’s (2023) Wittgensteinian approach to an articulation of the parergonal constitution of artworks, there is “*another form* of framing when it comes to the perspectivizations that artistic representations of any medium take by disclosing or questioning interpretative frameworks and their respective thought-patterns” (original emphasis, 47). The appropriate icon here is the visual illusion of Wittgenstein’s duck rabbit and the notion of “aspect seeing” that was tied to it, as a torsion in thinking and representation requisite in order to see something as something. However much it gets a bad rap, speculative design is the related territory that has been progressively refined with its most surgical interpretation coming from Benedict Singleton (2013, 2014, 2014) concerning a generalized suspicion of design with respect to practitioners who insist that in designing, they are not complicit in the manipulation of designing human behavior. We fancy that we are allowed an ethical smoke break, when in fact, design in principle is concerned with almost nothing else than orienting and manipulating our perceptions, actions, and beliefs. To design is to engage in an activity which utilizes what “[t]he ancient Greeks called the kind of intelligence expressed in the construction of a trap *mêtis*, which labels a certain guileful ingenuity” (Singleton 2014, 17)

What should be accepted here is a kind of ‘inverse forensics’ regarding the image and the work of art as image-object, opposed to the worldview of philosophy “that’s very much like the work of forensics, establishing the *modus operandi* of the world by reconstructing the evidence it leaves behind from the crimes it commits” (Singleton, 2018, 26). The *scene* that a work of art surveys is in this respect intended to be accepted as *trustworthy*. Instead, what we get with the frame project is closer to the trap of a hunter, where a speculative procedure establishes a coordinated site of conflict and cooperation. A trap is that thing which “doesn’t seek to ‘master’ the animal, in the sense of physically dominating it in a fair fight, but rather enlists the animal’s unwitting help in its own demise” (Singleton 2014, 24)

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