

FRAMES, PLINTHS AND VITRINES IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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In discussions about contemporary art, we are accustomed to hearing about how art has moved out beyond the frame into real space and time; we are familiar with theories relating to the destabilization of the artwork's definitive edge; and we are well versed in how distinctions between art and life have been eroded. As 'viewers' of art (and more recently as 'participants' in art) we have experienced this convergence within an evolving landscape of immersive art installations, site-specific artworks and collaborative art events. Despite art having entered into an expanded field of new possibilities - transgressing traditional media - physical frames (plinths and vitrines included) continue to play an important part in how artists and institutions display, protect and mediate works of art.

With contemporary artists regularly incorporating vitrines and plinths into their work (in many ways echoing the colonization of the picture frame by late nineteenth-century painters), coupled with the more general shift away from the discreet art object (as described above), it has become increasingly difficult to ascertain the exact boundary of an artwork. Where does an artwork end and the physical staging of that work begin? Where does exhibition design start to cut in? When is a plinth or vitrine part of museum furniture or part of an artwork?

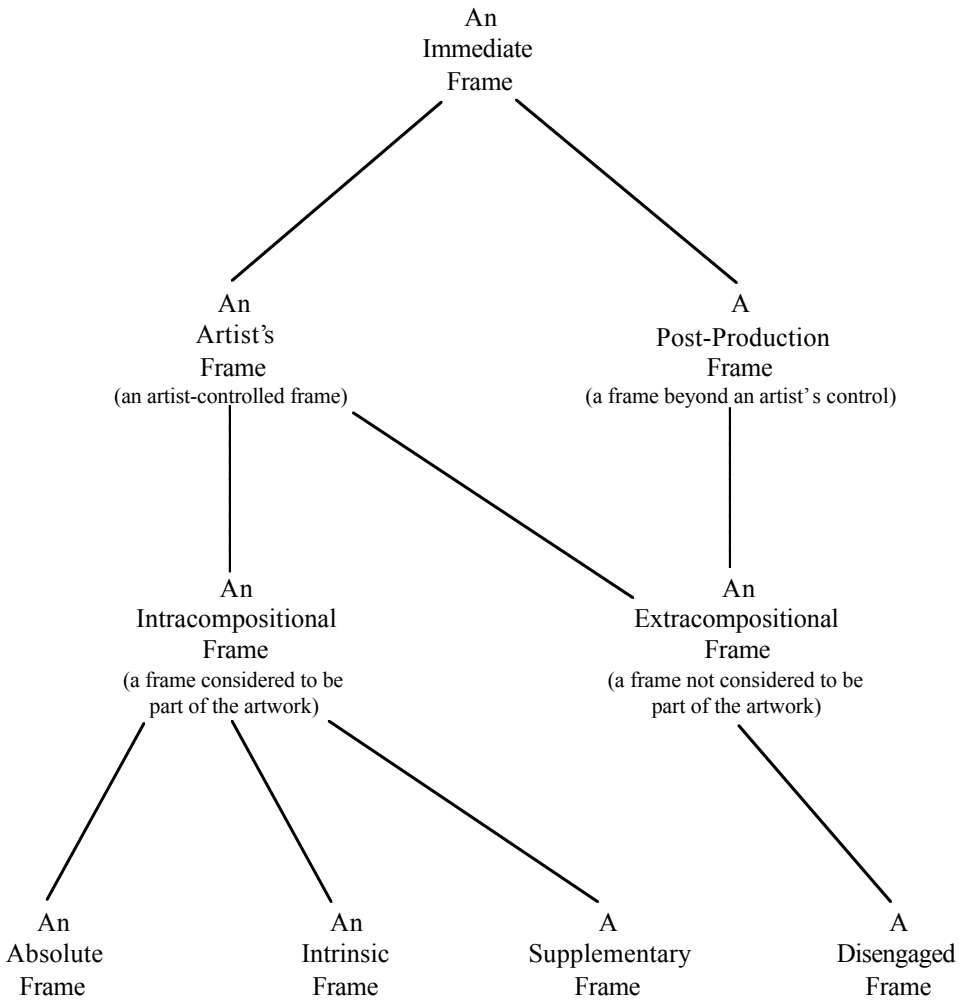
Ambiguity surrounding what constitutes the edge or limit of an artwork has obvious implications for the collection and conservation of that work. What exactly constitutes the work? When is it necessary to conserve the mode of presentation as well as the work being presented? Is an artist-controlled frame necessarily an integral and indispensable part of the work?

When analysing the various forms and functions of physical frames in contemporary art, it becomes clear that frames (plinths and vitrines again included) fulfil myriad roles. Damien Hirst's glass and steel containers, Chris Ofili's elephant dung pedestals, Marc Quinn's refrigeration display cases, and inconspicuous museum vitrines (which might house more than one artwork by more than one artist) all have unique physical and conceptual functions. A frame cannot simply be described as being part of an artwork or not, relevant or not, but must be regarded as relevant in different ways.

The categories, definitions and examples in the following pages relate to artist-controlled physical frames (particularly picture frames, plinths, and vitrines) at the point of exhibition.

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**FRAMES, PLINTHS AND VITRINES IN CONTEMPORARY ART:
categories, definitions and examples.**



An Immediate Frame:

An 'immediate frame' is a frame that is immediately attached or physically connected to an artwork, and which the viewer stands on the 'outside' of. An 'immediate frame' can potentially be transported with an artwork from setting to setting. It is a broad term which covers material frames such as picture frames, plinths, vitrines and display cases. An 'immediate frame' is opposite to an 'extended frame' (an immersive kind of frame experienced by the viewer from 'within' the frame or which is passed through in order to experience a work).

An Artist's Frame:

An 'artist's frame' is a frame that has been conceived, designed and/or fabricated by an artist specifically for one (or more) of his or her own artworks. This term is often used in connection with picture frames produced by artists during the mid to late nineteenth century (such as Ford Madox Brown, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Edgar Degas, and Georges Seurat) when artists started to take a more widespread interest in how their paintings were to be presented, but examples of 'artist's frames' also precede and continue on from this influential and relatively well documented period.

A Post-Production Frame:

A 'post-production frame' is a frame that has been added to an artwork after the artist in question has relinquished control of its production. This includes frames that have been applied to artworks by collectors, or frames that are the result of re-framing without input from the artist. A 'post-production' frame is therefore beyond the authorial control of the artist and can be seen as the binary opposite of an 'artist's frame'.

Intracompositional / Extracompositional Frames:

An 'intracompositional frame' is outlined by John H. Pearson in his essay 'The Politics of Framing in the Late Nineteenth Century' (1990) as a frame (in both literature and painting) that is considered to be an element of the artistic composition. For example, with regard to literature, Pearson presents Cervantes' Preface to his sequel of *Don Quixote* as 'intracompositional' because the "Preface and novel collaborate rather than remain utterly distinct" (p.15). In relation to visual art, the notion of an 'intracompositional frame' deals directly with the question of whether a frame is integral to an artwork or not.

An Absolute frame:

An 'absolute frame' refers to an artwork which can be described in its entirety as a physical frame. The removal of the frame would remove all trace of the artwork. Examples of this type of frame include:

Piero Manzoni's *Socle du Monde (Base of the World)* (1961).

Gavin Turk's *Stool* (1990).

Gareth Jones' *Modular Plinth* (2003).

An Intrinsic frame:

An 'intrinsic frame' is considered to be an integral and inseparable part of an artwork in relation to its form, signification and content. It is in some way built into the actual artwork, forming an in-built frame or in-built presentation system. An 'intrinsic frame' demarcates the boundary of an artwork from its outer edge. A key defining characteristic is that it constitutes part of what is being presented, rather than frames what is being presented. It is therefore impossible or unthinkable to photographically document or explain a work without also representing its 'intrinsic frame'. The materials for an 'intrinsic frame' are invariably listed on gallery labels and 'list of works'/room sheets etc. The removal of an 'intrinsic frame' from an artwork would essentially destroy the work. 'Intrinsic frames' therefore need to be protected from wear and tear whilst being exhibited, transported and stored. Examples of this type of frame include:

The gilded frame in Jeff Koons' *Christ and the Lamb* (1988).

The glass and steel container in Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years* (1990).

The refrigeration display case in Marc Quinn's *Eternal Spring (Sunflowers) I* (1998).

The Pedestal in Franz West's *Two Sculptures on a Pedestal* (1998).

A Supplementary frame:

A 'supplementary frame' is conceived and developed separately from an artwork - often after its completion - but is still considered to be an important (rather than an essential) part of the work. A 'supplementary frame' draws attention to itself as well as to what it contains, but it is usually regarded as secondary to what is being presented. Artworks with 'supplementary frames' are therefore often illustrated or described without their frames. However, because 'supplementary frames' are neither conceptually inert nor readily replaceable, they do require an increased level of care when it comes to the conservation of the artwork. Examples of artworks with 'supplementary frames' include:

Helen Chadwick's *Wreaths to Pleasure* series (1992-93).

Hany Armanious' *Untitled hair drawings #2-5* (2003).

Michael Lindeman's *New York Ghost* series (2004).

A Disengaged frame:

A 'disengaged frame' directs attention towards the artwork without ever appearing to be part of the artwork. It rarely strays from convention and could be said to have aspirations towards 'neutrality' or 'invisibility'. A 'disengaged frame' has more of a utilitarian function than a conceptual function and is often perceived as part of the museum/gallery furniture. It can usually be removed or replaced without drastically affecting the content or dimensions of a work. It is therefore unlikely that a critical review of an artwork would dwell upon a 'disengaged frame'. (It should be noted, however, that certain 'disengaged frames' may, in years to come, be regarded as having historical and contextual significance, but this would not necessarily alter the boundary of the actual work). Examples of this type of frame include:

Transferable museum box frames for works on paper.

Generic white gallery plinths.