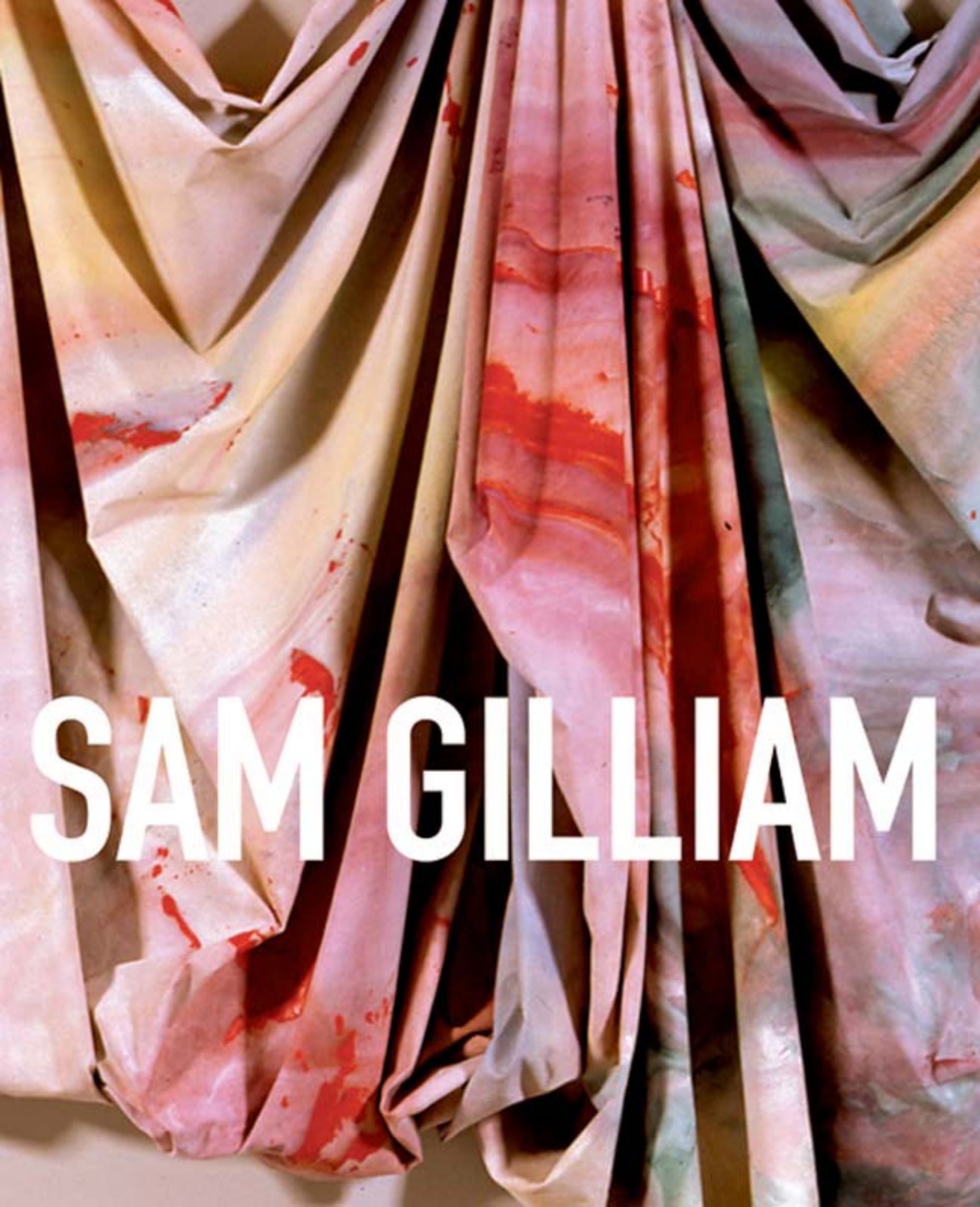
SAM GILLIAM

TWO DISCARDING THE FRAME

Gilliam's single most significant and celebrated invention, the draped or suspended painting, was a major development of the post-1960 era, and one that has earned him an enduring place in the history of formalist art.[1] But Gilliam's accomplishment is much greater than that. For the sheer force of their originality, their extraordinary, shocking, and unforgettable beauty, the suspended paintings were also a sign that abstract painting and robust, hot-blooded expression were alive and well, thriving in at least one corner of the art world despite the reigning vogue for cooler styles and forms such as pop, minimalism, and conceptual art. Moreover, the Drapes were a sign that the tradition of deeply personal, idiosyncratic, colorful aesthetic drama still mattered, even when many young artists were dismissing such work as self-indulgent in a world where radicalism and anti-institutional statements seemed to offer the only possible solutions for the oppressive ills that were being revealed in virtually all corners of American society.

Any attempt to assess the value of Gilliam's contributions to contemporary art must at some point confront the challenge of understanding what it meant for an African American to make some of the most important abstract art of the day in the midst of widespread grass-roots social and political activism—that is, at the height of the Black Power era. Gilliam's art was drawn regularly into the fray of politically motivated discourse that seemed to divert attention from the unique qualities of his art. Most art world professionals either embraced the lack of overt political subject matter in his imagery or lambasted him for making paintings that seemed to ignore the plight of African Americans. Neither approach—not even the one adopted by his supporters, who chose to ignore what they believed was the extraneous and distracting stain of racial and identity politics—sufficiently explained his aes-

thetic triumphs. This chapter is an effort to account for the wide-ranging and nuanced complexity of Gilliam's signature achievement.

If the Slice paintings imply an active engagement with the wall and a fluid interface with the physical space between the picture and the viewer, then the suspended paintings parlay these implications into literal and occasionally spectacular fact. Suspended paintings have no stretcher. Drooping like bunting, with swooping curves, or falling from ceilings in cascading folds, they swing through the air, loose, seemingly free, unabashedly sensual. At times they also cover the floor in ripples and waves, like the frothy surface of the ocean, a textile topcoat for a gallery's architectural foundation.

In this way the experience of the Drapes is not simply tied to observations of painterly phenomena or material, whether bound to wall, floor, or ceiling. Even when a work is installed on a flat and undivided wall, the experience of a Drape is physically consuming; it is off-the-wall, both literally and figuratively. It has to be. The deep and color-saturated shadowy crevices, baroque peaks and curls, and rhythmic undulations give these works an empirical power of presence that can flourish only in art that is absolutely and uncompromisingly true to its materials. One does not simply view a draped painting. As the critic Douglas Davis aptly put it in 1969, one "'enters' a Gilliam almost as if [one] would enter a room."[2]

The Drapes are situational. A number of major examples from the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as the Corcoran Gallery of Art's *Light Depth* (1969), measure 10 feet high by 75 feet wide. A select few—for instance, *Baroque Cascade* (1969; p. 53)—are as large as 10 by 150 feet. Charged with their presence, a gallery becomes a stage for the art encounter, which, as Gilliam is wont to describe it, is distinctly theatrical. He has said about some of the artists who inspired his thinking at the time, "I got very interested in [George] Segal and [Allan] Kaprow, or happenings in a sense, and I wanted to deal with this possibility of 'there's a painting,' 'there is not a painting,' or sort of being a little bit more into the theater of what was actually going on."[3]

There is indeed a painting there, in the warp and weft of the cotton weave and the facture of the painted color composition. From presentation to presentation these aspects do not change, even though a given Drape may be unrecognizable from one state to the next. This is because Gilliam, one of his assistants, a curator, or an exhibition designer must re-envision the painting with every reinstallation, and depending on how he or she realizes that vision, the painting's character may be transformed in dramatic ways—transformation being an essential part of that character. With few exceptions, the Drapes are not site-specific works in the purest sense. A Drape may depend on a location for its aesthetic spirit, but it is not inextricably dependent. It is not, for example, less complete or diminished when it is removed from a given location, which is what Richard Serra argued would happen to his site-specific sculpture, *Tilted Arc,* once it was removed from Federal Plaza in New York City, for which it was designed.[4]

Regularly reconfigured and reinstalled, for better or worse with each effort, there are nonetheless certain characteristics of a work's display that should, generally speaking, carry forward from one installation to the next. These are the parameters within which a given Drape may take its form. *Light Depth,* for example, typically spans a corner, but it might crowd that corner, stretch in a great horizontal expanse along an adjacent wall, or hang long and tall with steep vertical drops from a 20-foot-high ceiling. If one is accustomed to seeing the National Gallery of Art's *Relative* hanging on one wall,

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Light Depth, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 120 × 900 in. (flat). Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Museum Purchase.

with its four knots of various heights suggesting particular, predetermined relationships to one another, this does not mean that other possibilities do not abound.[5] A reproduction of the painting in an exhibition catalogue published by the Speed Art Museum in Louisville shows the piece suspended by four ropes that are probably attached to the ceiling. (It is difficult to say, because the ceiling is outside the picture's frame.)[6] Each rope hangs at a different distance from the partition in the background, so the canvas suggests a triangular shape in space, the partition forming one of its sides. What has remained consistent in the piece from this early image to the present day is a cord that cinches the canvas somewhere near its middle. All arrangements are correct, even though some may be more advantageous to the piece, the room, the exhibition, or the vantage point of the curator in charge.

Gilliam made and continues to make suspended paintings much as he did the first free-form poured pictures of 1966 and the Slice paintings that followed. Improvisational and open-ended, the method is direct, immediate, and never premeditated. The paint is poured, dabbed, dribbled, soaked into, or otherwise applied to canvas or polypropylene, either with the aid of tools or straight from cans and buckets.[7] From there the process yields any number of possible operations: folding the canvas back on itself like an accordion; tying it in knots; hanging it from architectural elements, random handy props, or working gear such as ladders; allowing it to dry splayed out on the floor; or manipulating it in some other as-yet-unimagined way.

It is most definitely not the application of paint that distinguishes these works from Gilliam's past efforts, even if the Drapes lack the cadenced creases that divide the surfaces of the Slice paintings. Rather, it is the pioneering vision of what a painting can be and what kinds of experiences it can offer that marks them as different. Almost any mechanism other than a rectangular wooden stretcher may help suspend a draped painting. Leather thongs, ropes, wires, and tacks are some of the most common and expedient devices. But Gilliam is just as likely to spread a Drape atop a freestanding wall, through the open transom of a doorway, or across the studio ladder he used to prop up the canvas while painting it. In the past he has substituted a different ladder for the original studio prop, as he did for his 1971 Projects installation at the Museum of Modern Art. Other times he will contrive his own handmade version of a mass-produced tool, such as a sawhorse, which figures in at least two major works from 1973, *"A" and the Carpenter I* and *Softly Still* (pp. 97, 98).

Especially where ladders, sawhorses, and the like are concerned, with their evocations of labor and work in progress, the exhibition space becomes a metaphor for the studio. The primary creative environment, the place where Gilliam nurtures his vision privately and artworks often exist in an unfinished state, is conflated with a communal space where one typically finds finished objects, conscientiously displayed and primed for public consumption. Yet the casual and seemingly careless disposition of the paintings is not the inevitable consequence of exploiting the pliant, virtually shapeless properties of canvas. Gilliam strives for this deliberately haphazard effect, which implies the fluid investigative processes that are the cornerstones of his method. In the Drapes one finds an extraordinary resolution of concept with practice and the full realization of Gilliam's fast-working, gutsy, and highly refined vision.

Even without the inclusion of actual instruments of labor, any suspended painting may be an indication of labor, whether active or potential. This is because any Drape installation is necessarily a

momentary pause in the life of an artwork that is perpetually in flux. Drapes make demands—for example, the trial-and-error fixing and primping that accompany any such installation—and are continuously susceptible to reinterpretation. The obligation for someone to work creatively on their behalf is thus an integral part of their character, and this obligation is always being transferred from one custodian to another, from one site to the next. In this regard the Drapes are not so much presented as they are performed. They live in a constant state of potentiality, even when installed, for any presentation is ultimately only one among innumerable possibilities. The Drapes are essentially events waiting to happen. Given the contemporary fashion for and familiarity with installation art, which often demands creative assistance and the adaptation of the work from presentation to presentation, it may be difficult for viewers today to appreciate how innovative Gilliam's efforts were. Yet the decision in 1968—when Gilliam first exhibited the Drapes at the Jefferson Place Gallery—to make paintings that could yield to the exhibition environment or capitalize on the idiosyncrasies of a given context was a radical departure from past approaches.

In 1995 Barbara Rose, the renowned critic and long-standing Gilliam champion, underscored the point when she said that his work "is really the culmination of the researches of the Washington Color School. He had a different generational attitude in relationship to [the Color School], so that there's a very strong conceptual element as his work goes on."[8] This conceptual element involves the creative process, which, for Gilliam, remains open-ended, even long after he completes the fabrication of the work. With one foot in formalist theory and reigning ideas about modernist painting—soak-stain techniques, color-field aesthetics, the gravity of history, and the implied truth of tradition—and the other foot in the realm of sculpture, performance, and succeeding conceptions of what new forms modern art might take, Gilliam was straddling two, apparently oppositional, generational attitudes. His was a singular and stunning creative synthesis.

The idea that the Color School represents a generational fault line finds one of its most convincing arguments in the writings of critic Brian O'Doherty (a.k.a. artist Patrick Ireland). His essay "Inside the White Cube," first published in *Artforum* in 1976 (in three parts), is now a classic of modern art criticism. In it O'Doherty contends that painting until and including color-field abstraction meant easel painting and that what followed was a radical turn toward context. Sometime in the 1960s, on the heels of the Color School's emergence, art not only entered the expanded field but also became integrated with it so that, in the best examples, art and context are indistinguishable from each other; art and context are one. To make his point (rather simplified in the present discussion), O'Doherty described the inch of a traditional stretcher's depth as "a formal abyss" that cannot be overcome.[9] It does not matter if the image is abstract or representational; the enclosing frame—a standard canvas-wrapped stretcher will also serve—completes the illusion that the interior space of a picture is not continuous with what lies outside it. It is both a physical and "psychological container."[10] The result is that the work and the wall are fundamentally separate entities. This fact distinguishes easel pictures from other art forms, such as murals or frescoes, which are less portable, less transferable, and ultimately less easily exchanged as commodities.

This notion bears special resonance in the context of Gilliam's development from Slice to suspended paintings, which stands almost ideally as an illustration of O'Doherty's treatise. Here, encapsulated

SAM GILLIAM
Relative, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 120 × 528 in. (flat), 120 × 162 in. (installed, variable). National Gallery of Art, Washington, Anonymous Gift. Image © 2005 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Photo: Richard Carafelli.

in the work of a single artist, is the world of painting before the shift and the beginning of what came after. The Slice paintings are not exactly easel pictures by the critic's reasoning, because their chamfered stretchers smooth the abrupt bump, as it were, between the painting's edge and everything outside it. Nonetheless, like standard easel pictures, the Slice paintings are not in the final analysis transferable to the wall. They are fully portable and, when moved from wall to wall and gallery to gallery, maintain their integrity as autonomous objects. The same cannot be said for the suspended paintings, which amount to an attack on the traditional conventions that Gilliam had so powerfully explored in his earlier work. Because they can adopt an infinite number of forms to satisfy the particular demands of almost any architectural environment, suspended paintings make the transition to the wall. They are also portable in the sense that they can be reinstalled repeatedly. But once situated, they are effectively *of* the place they inhabit. Drape paintings do not lie passively, "quietly on the wall," as O'Doherty describes easel pictures. Instead they are aggressive and on occasion even raucous incursions, spilling into the gallery space with bright, mottled, incongruous color combinations. As a viewer circulates around, underneath, and sometimes even through the works, the confrontation transcends the perceptual and becomes a physical condition, the consequence of one's bodily relation to the objects. Gilliam's ability to reveal what canvas can be, in all its material glory, figures importantly in the physicality of this engagement, which is a characteristic feature of the period, minimalist sculpture perhaps epitomizing the trend. The display of Donald Judd's reflective, mill aluminum boxes at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, demonstrates most persuasively how art can define a space or, the inverse also being true, how space can define art. Ambling through Judd's industrial sculptural installations, wending one's way among the parts that compose the whole, one appreciates not only the shared concerns of art and environment, but also how notions of context have the power literally to become art.

The difference with Gilliam is that his objects are resolutely paintings, which makes his art a contradiction of 1960s critical terminology. A vital reinterpretation of our enduring fascination with "the grain and bite of the canvas," to use O'Doherty's pithy reference for modernist connoisseurship, the suspended paintings simultaneously upset and re-entrench the traditions from which they emerged. They are a bridge between painting and what came after, including performance, installation, and the renaissance that painting enjoyed in the 1980s. A key member of the generation of painters to come of age just as the medium was facing its so-called demise in the late 1960s, Gilliam has been crucial to its continued relevance.

More than three decades after Gilliam first developed the Drapes, the enormous significance of the artist's resistance to easy categorization is coming into clearer focus. The lesson would not be lost on O'Doherty, who might appreciate, at least theoretically, the way in which Gilliam discarded the frame so that his flights of painterly fantasy could inundate the space of the gallery. O'Doherty muses in his text: "I've always been surprised that Color Field—or late modernist painting in general—didn't try to get onto the wall, didn't attempt a rapprochement between the mural and the easel picture."[11] To wit, Gilliam exceeded the rapprochement the critic describes and transformed the terms of our engagement with the discipline in general. He transferred painting to the wall and then beyond it, to the architecture that determines the wall, thereby wresting painting from the realm of its own autonomy and laying it at the feet of the viewer.