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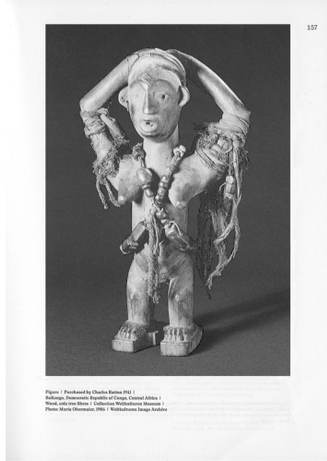


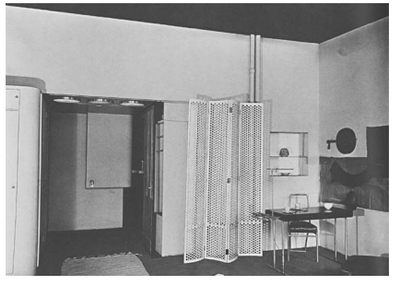
Figure 1 Purchased by Charles Batten 1911 /
Bafiango, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central Africa /
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Photo: Mario Obermaier, 1924 © Weltkulturen Image Archive

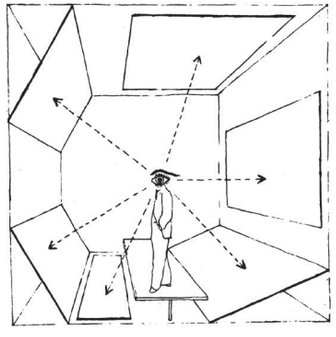
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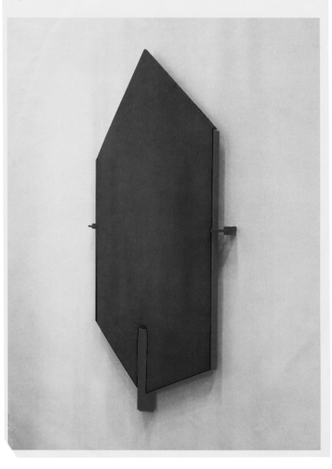


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IN THE BACKGROUND

Céline Condorelli (CC) & James Langdon (JL) in conversation

JL I have a collection of images — that I know you are familiar with — gathered from amateur archaeological websites. They are of a very particular type: an artefact of some description has just been unearthed and is held, addressing the camera, by the hand of the person who discovered it. I am interested in the directness and unpretentiousness of these images. They could hardly be less abstract. At the edges of the image there is usually visible some geography, a view of the excavation site, or of the broader landscape giving a clue to the location. And the data of the artefact itself — scale, surface, weight — measured in relation to the hand. Something about the identity of this person and their motivations is revealed too. Their gender, the colour of their skin — the implications of which may be benign or suggestive of colonial narratives — we see their age in the texture of their skin, their experience in handling artefacts.

But more telling, there is the elementary gesture of display — the action of showing something to someone, or to the camera. This gesture is always deliberate. Assumptions about the artefact made by the person handling it become legible. This particular image (fig. 1) shows a fragment of rock manually shaped to be used for cutting meat, a typical and defining object in the civilisation of early humans. The hand is predisposed to provide this narrative, gripping the rock as we collectively suppose its maker would have, or in this example, so its sharp point impresses on the fingertip in a demonstrative way. The hand makes many didactic assumptions; it wields what it understands to be weapons; it cradles what it believes to be votives; it emphasises the important details of inscrutable objects. I think the gesture of handling an object in public is the most immediate form of exhibition.

CC As a transferral of that gesture to the formal language of exhibition design, we could look at the rotating display device that the Italian designer Franco Albini adopted for the Palazzo Bianco in Genoa in 1952. Albini repurposed a hydraulic car lift as a support for the centrepiece of the Palazzo's collection, fragments from Giovanni Pisano's tomb for Margaret of Brabant (1313). It's actually three fragments of a sculpture, with three figures composed in a way that suggests this rotating movement. By the door Albini placed a button that allowed the public to activate the movement. It rotates the sculpture silently and gracefully, in a highly choreographed way. This is a still from a film made by Graham Ellard and Stephen Johnstone in 2011 (fig. 2) that includes a beautifully convincing CGI reconstruction of the display. The original apparently was removed not long after the Palazzo was renovated.

Albini's device mimics the handling that you are talking about, and that an archaeologist might perform, both when finding and inspecting an object — to appreciate what it is — and then in order to present it. But, I think that this gesture doesn't necessarily assume display. It's the same handling that we do when we go to a market and inspect an object or a piece of fruit. That's important because of a disconnection that Albini's device highlights. When value is conferred onto cultural artefacts we typically limit the physical contact that a public can have with them. You can't handle most artefacts in museums. Albini's machine is so smooth and silent that it transforms a familiar gesture into an extraordinary one. The object seems possessed, its movement is magical but also alienating.

JL This is a photograph of a Congolese figure (fig. 3) from the archives of the

Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, Germany, an institution with a significant collection of over 60,000 ethnographic artefacts. In 2014, as part of an exhibition called *Foreign Exchange, Or, The Stories You Wouldn't Tell A Stranger*, the museum presented an archive of in-house photographs of its own collection. The visual language of these images is surprisingly consistent over recent decades. Artefacts — masks, figures, plaques, and so on — are photographed isolated on plain backgrounds, in a particular palette of bold purples, reds, browns, oranges and blues. The pictures are compelling, but in the *Foreign Exchange* exhibition they are represented in an extremely critical context. Their abstraction is seen to be loaded with explicitly colonial narratives. Consistent with the practices of the time when these objects were acquired — mostly during the 18th and 19th centuries — the museum has no information about the makers of the objects, and in some cases what their function or meaning was in the culture that produced them. The photographs compensate for their missing provenance by projecting onto the objects these aesthetics of exoticism and otherness suggested by superficially 'ethnic' colours. I think the colour is meant to be decoded unconsciously, like a smoothing over of that disparity. It comes close to advertising photography in making such a calculated appeal.

CC In terms of display every object has needs. Every object lacks something — be it qualification, or protection, or certain conditions of light — and display can be a gesture of care and provision. In this example the purple background creates an atmosphere that is a cue to the viewer. Even though it's an imposed colour, I think it does have a form of truth to it. The figure has been taken out of its context. Culturally, it has been abstracted. By making the background active — I mean by resisting any pretence of neutrality in the choice of colour — this alienation remains visible. I read it as a way of underlining the fact that the figure has been alienated. It's true not to where the object came from, but true to its present context.

Charlotte Klonk, in her book, *Spaces Of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors From 1800 To 2000*, writes about the history of background colours painted on the walls of museums. It's interesting how relative meaning is here. We attribute neutrality to white, but that is quite a recent phenomena, the product of a specific series of historical conversations and developments. The discourse of neutrality was being made two centuries ago in relation to totally different colours. Green was the generally accepted neutral background colour, especially when showing painting. But there were discussions about it being yellow or red. Historically the colour of walls for displaying art has been informed variously by colour theory and psychology, by trends in interior design and in art itself. Today we have an orthodoxy of the white cube, but there is nothing preordained about that, or even about the general preference for neutrality.

JL You're identifying two distinct functions of backgrounds here. This general concept of neutrality is one — a background that means to disappear. This approach speaks to a pragmatic visual clarity, a simple and unmediated looking. I think of Christopher Williams's photography here. He makes a spectacle of the mechanisms of the studio. His photographs of designed objects use backgrounds that are spotless, so perfect that they become delirious. I look at them and imagine an environment like the infinite white void in George Lucas's *THX 1138*.

Alternatively, there is the impulse to make an appropriate background, something that actively provides — as you put it — for the thing it displays. This is an extension of the storytelling gesture that I see in my amateur archaeological images. The Weltkulturen Museum photograph operates in this way, but the mystification of the object that it provides is problematic.

CC I don't know that it does mystify. A Marxist reading of this would be that mystification here is about the production of value. What's removed by this background is the evidence of labour. The object is commodified. It is freed from its original function, to be sold, transported, displayed.

But to follow through the thought about the dual functions of backgrounds … Archaeological photographs are commonly produced in two versions, with a hierarchy of different applications. An object of study will first be photographed with a supplementary object for scale: either a coin, or a ruler, or something made for the purpose such as a 'scale cube' — a centimetre cube with U[p], D[own], N[orth], S[outh], E[ast], W[est] printed on its faces — or a piece of paper showing measurements and colours for reference. This photograph is for scholars, to facilitate their appraisal of the object. A second photograph is made without the supplement, and that image is used for display and publication. That hierarchy supports the idea that there is an ideal mode of display for commodification — in total abstraction — but the photograph that people use to work with, to produce knowledge with, requires additional information.

It's worth mentioning the French film *Statues Also Die* by Ghislain Cloquet, Chris Marker, and Alain Resnais. It was made in 1953 and is a direct critique of colonialism in an ethnographic museum. Images of traditional African sculptures are set to music, with a spoken commentary ridiculing the viewer's ignorance of the objects. They are shown from this post-colonial perspective that we are talking about, and of course they are rendered meaningless because we as Europeans cannot actually read them. The film focuses on speculative, emotional qualities in the objects, and their total alienation. It's quite ahead of its time — although by now its vocabulary has dated — and it was banned in France for 15 years because its message is so sensitive.

JL The visual differences between *Statues Also Die* and the Weltkulturen Museum photograph are interesting. In the film the objects appear from and recede into a black void. It's a very atmospheric background, but in an unmistakeably sinister, deathly way.

These are still politically sensitive subjects. As you know, Clémentine Deliss, the director of the Weltkulturen Museum — and the initiator of the *Foreign Exchange* project, amongst others that asked similarly uncomfortable questions — was recently dismissed from her post in controversial circumstances. I read a revealing conversation between her and Frédéric Keck, the director of the Department of Research and Education at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. Deliss tells a story of a visit from a Kogi community — an indigenous ethnic group from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia — to the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. The museum has a number of Kogi masks in its collection. The visitors wanted to spiritually 'recharge' these masks by holding them, but were told that they would not be allowed to do this because the masks are coated with chemical preservatives that are highly toxic.

CC It's a rather discouraging reality. Because, of course, one might assume that these discourses of colonialism have been thoroughly assimilated by anthropologists and ethnographers. Post-colonial studies has been so prevalent, and indeed emerged from within the ethnographic museums, especially around James Clifford's work on de-colonising the museum.

I saw Clémentine Deliss speak at a conference in Arles called *How Institutions Think*, organised by the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. I designed some of the staging elements for the conference. She spoke very candidly on these subjects. I think she was eager — and the photographs we are looking at are a good reminder of this — to be able to bring these objects into the present and activate them. To re-socialise these objects. For her first exhibition at the Weltkulturen Museum in 2010 she invited artists, designers, and musicians to come and study the collections. Not because they might be expected to have something valuable to say about the history of the objects, but because they would be able to make new works from them. Which is also a gesture of display, in a way, and which creates new knowledge from them. I find it a very beautiful and powerful politics, but it ran counter to many of the other forces that regiment ethnography, and not just in Germany. Framed by such conservative forces these objects become actually too dangerous, ideologically speaking, to be used. Their colonial narratives are perceived to be unspeakable, to the point that they must become invisible, literally, in the stores of the museum.

JL This is a photograph of a pocket radio designed at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, in Germany, in the late 1950s (fig. 4). Work from the school's product design department was often presented in this way, photographed on plain white or grey backgrounds. Like the ethnographia that we have talked about, the narratives that surrounds these images are contrary.

The inception of the school in 1953 was a direct response to fascism. The school was independent, financed by a private foundation that bore the name of Hans and Sophie Scholl, victims of the Nazis. The Swiss designer, Max Bill, one of its founders, said that the school existed to create a new culture of the everyday for the industrial age. To design objects that in the future would be considered worthy of a place in a museum. In the product design department they worked on simple objects — tableware and furniture, and on more complex things like consumer electronics. The school's aesthetics were very minimal, typically avoiding colour and decorative styling. At the time perhaps that seemed the only possible response, in the immediate aftermath of Nazism. But as I look at them now, out of this aspiration to assert an uncomplicated culture of the everyday comes a sterile, controlled aesthetic that seems to foreshadow the politics of Cold War Germany.

Of course there is an important difference between these images and the Weltkulturen Museum photographs. These images were most likely made by, or for, the designers of the objects. Or by the school's archivists. In that sense they have a more coherent internal logic. The backgrounds read as extensions of the design language of the objects. The plain grey background in the image is visually and conceptually consistent with the plain grey surface of the radio.

CC They are somehow very close to drawings or graphics.

JL I find it difficult to accept these backgrounds as neutral, though. Rightly or wrongly, I see in their aesthetics an echo of the public dispute between Max Bill and Jan Tschichold that was published in the graphic design journal *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen* in 1946. In the 1920s, Tschichold had popularised a radically modern graphic language in Europe, emphasising asymmetry and active use of unprinted space. Historically he has remained closely associated with this 'new typography'. But later in his life he renounced this work and turned back — or so some of his contemporaries, including Bill, felt — toward conservative, traditional book design. Bill's work remained resolutely modernist throughout. The crux of their dispute was Tschichold's perception that after the experience of Nazi Germany, the uncompromising aesthetics of modernist design were somehow corrupted. He expressed it like this: 'because its intolerant attitude conforms to the German bent for the absolute, and its military will to regulate and its claim to absolute power reflect those fearful components of the German character which set loose Hitler's power and the Second World War.'

These images contain something of that corruption. This example is absolutely simple and straightforward, an informative, clear picture. But it seems not to admit the banality and messiness of everyday life that it supposedly aspires to. Even in its self-consciously, resolutely, anti-fascist programme, the school was not able to avoid the 'bent for the absolute' in its aesthetics.

CC Reflecting on the backdrop to everyday life in a completely different register, these are Herbert Bayer's *Kaleidoscreens* (fig. 5). I've never actually seen them apart from in images. I think there is still an example in Aspen, Colorado, where Bayer — an Austrian émigré — lived after 1946. Bayer used these graphic forms in a number of printed advertisements for an aluminium company, and they also existed as prototype products. They are semi-functional objects, they could be a background to a garden or a living space. A background for posing in front of. They also function as screens and light filters. They have adjustable louvers to direct the light. What's interesting about them as backgrounds is that they are two-dimensional objects that have three-dimensional properties.

In the same years — and I have no idea if they knew each other — Eileen Gray was making screens that also have these qualities of unfolding graphic shapes into three-dimensional space (fig. 6). Gray's screens function as a filter between two spaces, as in a traditional domestic situation where the kitchen might be screened off. You would hide parts of your everyday space as a way of 'staging' your social life.

JL This juncture, between the two-dimensional image and the three-dimensional exhibition has been very productive for us in our work. 'Background' is a useful word, because more so than 'display' it feels equally native to graphic design, photography, and exhibition design.

CC Another important example of that, one that we have talked about many times, is the Palazzo Abatellis, a Sicilian palace and museum renovated by the Italian designer Carlo Scarpa in 1953. In these spaces the displays of classical and Renaissance painting and sculpture are made to create very specific views. They align you with the artwork, and with the space, in ways that are like the action of composing a photograph.

I see a direct line, historically, from Bayer to this. In the 1930s Bayer was making these diagrams of the 'all-seeing eye' (fig. 7), representing the spectator in an exhibition situation as an abstracted eye. Not a body, but a pure embodiment of vision. I suppose this is related to a cultural tendency towards individualism — you are the centre of the universe from the point at which you observe it. I think both Albini and Scarpa — although I have no idea of how much they knew about Bayer's work — were very influenced by this ideology. They worked toward producing three-dimensional images, views that work for a viewer in space and in motion. There is definitely a sense of encounter. The backgrounds hide and reveal certain objects as you navigate around them.

Most poignantly, at the Palazzo Abatellis, Scarpa made a background for a 15th century processional frame, in the Hall of the Annunciation. A few feet

behind the object is a hexagonal green panel mounted on the wall (fig. 8). It looks like an abstract painting, but it is actually a background that allows you, when you enter the room, to see this elaborate baroque frame with a visual centre. The frame would originally have carried a symbolic fragment in its centre. The fragment isn't there anymore — perhaps it's in a church somewhere — so there is this void. The background that Scarpa adds allows you to encounter it in a way that subtly articulates this. He's not trying to replace the missing element, just to enable you to understand that it is missing through this quite sophisticated visual and spatial language.

In the Palazzo's Hall of Laurana are sculptures supported on slender poles (fig. 9). The walls behind these are highly pigmented, either green or blue. Again, like an abstract painting — it could be a Barnett Newman mural. But it's not painted, it's the render of the wall, just specific to the area behind these sculptures. The colours are offsets to the very delicate white sculptures. You read their profiles, forms, and edges much more clearly not against white.

Scarpa understood that the optimal viewing conditions were always relative. He developed these framing devices with handles that can be swung or rotated slightly to avoid the reflection of light on the surface of the paintings at different times of day. At the Museo Canova in Possagno there is another dimension that is quite extraordinary. Instead of having windows positioned centrally on the walls, the upper corner of a room itself is taken out and becomes a glass box. The sunlight enters the room and washes onto the walls. They become incredibly bright, and you see the museum's sculptures more distinctly because they are set in contrast to the highly illuminated walls.

JL Albini and Scarpa worked often in heavy materials, with very involved and intricate spatial arrangements. Their work is definitive. They are practitioners of that second type of background that we identified, the type that provides for the thing it displays. Do you think these very deterministic backgrounds, involving considerable intellectual and manual labour, represent the most exemplary possibilities of display?

CC This way of working with a permanent collection is extremely privileged in dedicating itself to a particular group of artefacts in a particular context. And the situation itself makes so little demand. I mean these places are visited by perhaps 20 people in a day. Albini's display for the Margaret of Brabant fragments is only possible in such accommodating conditions. It's incompatible with the idea of offering culture to everybody. I find that interesting in relation to the kind of exhibition-making that is happening in the major art museums that are visited by tens of thousands of people in a day. That kind of industrial scale of exhibition-making requires so much other effort that is not toward producing insight or knowledge but just serves to maintain the basic conditions of these public spaces. There is this resistance to erosion, to dirt and accidents, just to maintain what we understand as the most simplistic, white-walled display, even before there can be any consideration of interpretation.

In post-war Italy, many museums had been destroyed and there was a massive reconstruction effort. They were all being reconstructed at once. This explains why there was so much experimentation happening in that time and place, and why relatively young architects and designers were getting such major commissions. Italian culture had to be reconstructed in a way that didn't relate to fascism. There was something profoundly aesthetic in the response, something apolitical in avoiding these polluted readings of the white walls — or backgrounds — that you talked about in the photograph from Ulm.

It makes me a little uneasy that neither Scarpa nor Albini speak very much about politics in their work. They pretend as if the social and the political don't exist.

JL It's ironic that there is arguably an equal expenditure of effort in the two scenarios you describe — the effort to imagine and realise a very specific and insightful display for a small audience, and the effort to maintain the most apparently straightforward display for a large public.

Photographing artworks in exhibitions also demands a concerted effort to produce something apparently effortless. When you photograph something on a white wall there might be several different light sources in the space, some natural light, some artificial, and the combinations of the two are reflected by the architecture. The result in a photograph can be quite a considerable variation in what a visitor to the exhibition would have registered — if not in the moment, then certainly in memory — as just white. I've spent many hours graphically cutting out intricate artworks for reproduction in catalogues, in order to impose a subtly off-white background on them which is then reconciled with the floor from the original photograph to make the simple, obvious image that you would expect (fig. 10, fig. 11). During this process at the computer I always doubt if the result will look believable, but in print it conforms perfectly to how you would imagine a picture in a white cube.

In fact, though, the vast majority of reproductions of artworks have no background at all. They are shown as isolated graphic forms on the page.

CC Which reminds me of this Frederick Kiesler sketch that I showed you (fig. 12). Kiesler was an Austrian-American architect who did a lot of radical work on display. In this case I don't think he would have used the idea of a background. It's another kind of site, a space between the artwork and the human perception of it that he identified as being where he wanted his work to take place. To modulate the relationship between artwork and viewer. It removes the idea of background completely, or in another sense it makes it theatrical, even emphasises it as a tool for isolating and removing these small environmental distractions. In the sketch we see this filtering device, like a scope that the viewer looks through onto the artwork. But it's so radical, so obtrusive and sculptural, that the artwork actually becomes the background.

JL There is an example of Albini's work that I always refer to, and that I think reconciles these extremes. It's a structure for a temporary exhibition of paintings by Luca Cambiaso at the Palazzo dell'Accademia in Genoa from 1956 (fig. 13). Compared to the Kiesler, and even to Albini's own display for the Margaret of Brabant fragments, I find this structure first of all to be very reasonable. It's a thin space-frame construction that creates a continuous surface for hanging paintings in front of the existing architecture. I understand the logic of that choice to be that the constraints of the space — the walls are divided frequently by alcoves — make it impossible to achieve the desired sequence and placement of the paintings. So the exhibition wants to ignore the constraints of the space, but it does so without masking them. It imposes itself on the architecture, but with this slightness and transparency. Despite being painted black, the space-frame is visually very thin. Its position, perhaps 18 inches away from the wall, means that the architecture remains completely present and uninterfered with, and the backs of the paintings become visible too. What I like so much is that this process of decision-making is exposed, it is completely legible. I see it in a very graphic way, it is less sculptural, or at

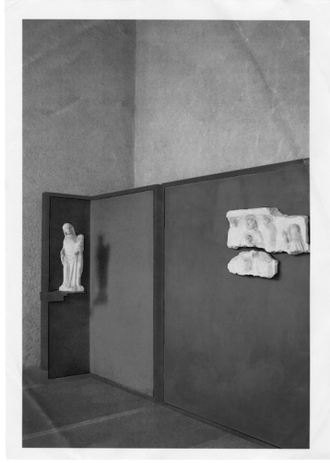
least less heavy, than our other examples of work by Albini and Scarpa. It has this graphic quality, it shows you the rhythm of the space, and it layers it with the rhythm of the exhibition.

CC On the theme of transparency we might conclude with the glass 'easel' displays made by Lina Bo Bardi for the Museu de Arte de São Paulo in 1969. I have this wonderful photograph of her — at least I presume it's her — in the exhibition space with them (fig. 14). This follows to the extreme the idea of taking the paintings off the wall and having them inhabit the room. In this case they are mostly European portrait paintings. They are hung at the same level as the viewer in the space, on glass panels slightly larger than the works that terminate in rough concrete bases on the floor. They become themselves a crowd of characters. The effect is very different to a conventional portrait gallery.

When you look at these displays as objects, it's not immediately apparent how politically different they are to some of the other displays we've talked about. But when you see people behaving in this space — which I have seen, because it has recently been reinstalled — you realise that it's made from an entirely different point of view. It embeds the artwork into people's inhabiting of the space. The public, the people occupying the space, become each other's background.

Reference images, denoted throughout the text as 'fig.', are housed on the signature-wrap bookending this 8-page section. Supporting elements and structures referred to in the conversation are highlighted in red.

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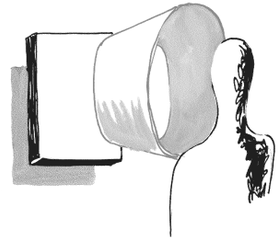
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1 Amateur archaeological photograph.
2 Still from Graham Ellard and Stephen Johnstone's film *Neue Museen* (2011). Courtesy the artists.
3 ∗**for red read purple**∗
Congolese figure, as reproduced in the book *Foreign Exchange*, published by Weltkulturen Museum/ Diaphanes (2014).
4 Pocket radio designed by Dieter Rams and students at Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (1958).
5 ∗**for red read primary colours**∗
Herbert Bayer's 'Kaleidoscreens', as reproduced in the book *Herbert Bayer, Visual Communication, Architecture, Painting*, published by Studio Vista (1967).
6 Eileen Gray's perforated metal screen at Badovici Apartment, Paris (1930–1931).
7 Herbert Bayer's field of vision diagram (1935).
8 ∗**for red read pastel green**∗
Carlo Scarpa's background for a 15th century processional frame, Palazzo Abatellis (1953).
9 ∗**for red read pale blue, deep red**∗
Carlo Scarpa's backgrounds, Palazzo Abatellis (1953).
10 ∗**for red read white**∗
Photoshop mask for reproduction of an artwork by Neal Rock.
11 Neal Rock, *Reduced/Notched* (2009). Courtesy the artist.
12 Undated Sketch by Frederick Kiesler, photographed by Céline Condorelli, recoloured by James Langdon.
13 ∗**for red read lightness**∗
Franco Albini's exhibition design for Luca Cambiaso at the Palazzo dell'Accademia, as reproduced in the book *Exhibitions*, published by The Architectural Press, 1961.
14 Lina Bo Bardi's displays for the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (1969).