

Fourth Wall

You can't make a fourth wall, it is going to happen whether you want it or not, it is the opening that we imagine to exist or the one that is the spooky feeling that you're being watched. People of all cultures who visit graves of those they have lost get the feeling that the deceased is watching them. This fourth wall is facing up in its relation to the sky, but like all fourth walls, it is bipolar and also faces to the earth where we saw them last, going down. Up/down, in/out, you/me ... the fourth wall is the last word in contronyms, that phenomenon of the single word with two opposite meanings. This makes counting walls very interesting, because although our western cultures count to four before we say "room!" in other cultures the number is higher. I say this because there is always a number, even in cultures who live in round spaces (yurts, huts); they just *forbid* counting but, in the turn that is simultaneously a curse or blessing, whether it is clockwise or counter-clockwise, counting is implicit.

The fourth wall faces the dark, which may be why when facing the future we use a metaphor of dawn or sunset, when our face can be met with what at high noon is a "time for death" when the sun is also symbolically at its antipode, midnight — another contronym. In the base-10 counting system, the number 9 is the fourth wall, because (in Vedic math at least) it can be withdrawn and added back without disturbing the other numbers of a calculation. In fact, it is a "truth-telling number," because the removal and return of the 9 authorizes a transaction, shows that the calculation was correct. Cecil Balmond's little book on the number 9 notices this and many other things, such as the 9's graphic origins in spinning, the number that is both a Sufi mystic and a shaman with ritual secret words. We count to 10 but before reaching it we specify an empty space, a place to come and go, held up by the glass that Proust described when he put a jar of minnows into the Vivonne River, the best-ever description of transparency that has ever appeared in words.

I would amuse myself by watching the glass jars which the boys used to lower into the Vivonne, to catch minnows, and which, filled by the current of the stream, in which they themselves also were enclosed, at once "containers" whose transparent sides were like solidified water and "contents" plunged into a still larger container of liquid, flowing crystal, suggested an image of coolness more delicious and more provoking than the same water in the same jars would have done, standing upon a table laid for dinner, by shewing it as perpetually in flight between the impalpable water, in which my hands could not arrest it, and the insoluble glass, in which my palate could not enjoy it. I decided that I would come there again with a line and catch fish; I begged for and obtained a morsel of bread from our luncheon basket; and threw into the Vivonne pellets which had the power, it seemed, to bring about a chemical precipitation, for the water at once grew solid round about them in oval clusters of emaciated tadpoles, which until then it had, no doubt, been holding in solution, invisible, but ready and alert to enter the stage of crystallisation.

The fourth wall makes coolness more delicious and more provoking ... perpetually in flight between the impalpable water ... and the insoluble glass. How can we ever lose sight of this stone monument of words that forever say, *here is transparency, here is the fourth wall ... take all your measures from this point.* In thinking about Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Running Fence* the fourth wall is open/closed not by the cloth or the wire strung over 39.4 km (24.28 miles) — challenging the usual caption information that describes a work of art — but by the sound of the cloth as it was pulled across the cable.