

# Looking and being looked at: Richard Estes's telephone cabins

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**Richard Estes**  
***Telephone Booths*, 1967**  
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

Richard Estes's *Telephone Booths* [fig. 1] is an urban scene with four occupied phone cabins in the foreground. Around them and reflected on them we catch glimpses of buildings, shops, signs and motor vehicles – recognisable by their yellow colour as taxis – and other features typical of modern life in New York. Further in the distance it is possible to make out several passers-by and a few mannequins in shop windows, and towering behind them, forming a sort of backdrop, buildings so tall that their façades and roofs extend beyond the upper edge of the support. The most striking aspect of the cityscape is the play of reflections, some of which are clearly defined (on the glass) and others deformed (on the metal surfaces). These mirrorings play a major role in a composition made up of vertical and horizontal lines arranged in grid-like fashion and crowded with details in a sort of *horror vacui* meant to capture a moment in bustling Manhattan, only to distort it in a play of reflections and dualisms.

Now part of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection of American art, this spectacular view of New York was acquired by Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza from the Andrew Crispo Gallery in 1977. Two years earlier he had purchased Estes's *People's Flowers* (1971), and several years later, in 1996, its current owner, Carmen Thyssen, bought *Nedick's* (1970). In addition to these paintings, the baron's descendants own a further two works by the artist: *Self-Portrait near the Oculus at World Trade Center* [fig. 4] and *Hotel Lucerne (Phone-Phone)* (1976). All of these works provide an X-ray of American society of the day, earning the artist immediate recognition for his seemingly naïve and objective manner of capturing the essence of his time.<sup>1</sup>

*Telephone Booths* was painted toward the end of the 1960s, a decade marked by the Cold War in which the United States headed the Western capitalist bloc. The American people feared the outbreak of a nuclear war, espionage and, in general, the presence of foreigners. During those years America was also involved in the Vietnam War (1955–75), which triggered anti-war demonstrations all over the country.

<sup>1</sup>

Richard Estes had his first solo exhibition at the Allan Stone Gallery in 1968. The gallery devoted several more shows to him until 1978. After that, museums the world over took the baton, staging exhibitions of his work up to the present day.



fig. 1  
**Richard Estes**  
*Telephone Booths*, 1967  
Acrylic on masonite, 122 × 175.3 cm  
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,  
Madrid, inv. 539 (1977.93)

**2**  
Estrella de Diego, 'Contaminaciones (norte)americanas', in *La pintura de los Estados Unidos de América en el Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza*, Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2012, available at [Contaminaciones \(norte\) americanas](#) by Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza - Issuu.

**3**  
Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

It was a time of great social tension heightened by the many protest marches in favour of civil rights. Reported stories of 'us' and 'them'<sup>2</sup> masked the constant political conflicts, which were in turn fuelled by conspiracy theories triggered by the McCarthyism of the previous decade. In this context, the painting offers a unique perspective of a polarised nation where the act of gazing becomes crucial amid myriad visual challenges.<sup>3</sup>



## Urban still life

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*Telephone Booths* is an urban still life, a hybrid genre that shuns traditional domestic settings and instead reproduces city features that take on specific meanings, as they do here, to present the metropolis as the backdrop for consumer society. Although Estes's paintings are usually regarded as landscapes, they contain a number of still-life references. Their ability to create a particular atmosphere in a given space links them with Photorealism, despite the artist's reluctance to be associated with this movement. They also share ties, albeit frail ones, with Pop Art, the movement that ushered in a return to figurative painting after two decades of abstraction and whose artists appropriated various references from everyday life. Pop still life infuses objects with new connotations, besides granting them the status of art.<sup>4</sup> In this picture Estes borrows visual allusions to Pop culture to represent the city. Within the wealth of information rendered in painstaking detail, a distinction can be drawn between objects and signs, the legacy of classical still-life scenes. Both act as symbolic references in the work.<sup>5</sup>

In the painting there are more than a dozen signs, some legible and others indecipherable, but all there for a common purpose: they function as logos. Each alludes to a shop, a brand or a particular symbol that spectators recognise as part of the culture of their time. Prominent among them is the marquee sign of Macy's, one of the biggest chains of department stores in the United States. Macy's was founded in 1858 and expanded all over the country in the 1920s. Its flagship store, built in 1902 in New York at the corner of Broadway and 34th Street, is the one that appears in the picture. It was and is a city landmark. The fact that the phone booths are located at the intersection of streets opposite the store explains why it is possible to see a profusion of yellow cabs both reflected in the metal, as if they were passing in front of them, and through the transparent glass, driving along the street behind them.

4

See Paloma Alarcó, *Pop Art Myths* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2014.

5

These pictograms recall the type of code language employed by spies and, together with the people in raincoats, recreate a scene that seems to be taken from a comic strip. This figure has been linked to phone booths in the popular imaginary ever since.

6

Paloma Alarcó and Alba Campo Rosillo, *American Art from the Thyssen Collection* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2021, 155–65.

Estes used lettered signs, most of which are reflected in the upper part of the phone cabins, to represent the social mass.<sup>6</sup> It is these signs that speak to us about the type of places they occupy and where the city's inhabitants go.



fig. 2  
Detail of reflections in a digitally  
manipulated image of *Telephone  
Booths*

If we block out the areas of the picture outside the metal structure of the booths, the resulting image is made up solely of reflections [fig. 2]. These are not separate representations; together they form an overall view that extends across the cabins and features taxis, mannequins and even a traffic light.<sup>7</sup> This distorted representation of the reflected signs and objects is part of a visual game that vividly conveys the city's atmosphere but also causes bewilderment, since the warped imitation of reality prevents us from distinguishing between object, transparency and reflection.

Together with the reflections mentioned above, the elements in the picture act as signifiers of the urban still life. Take the people and mannequins, for instance, both of which function as objects in the picture. Their purpose is to reproduce the social mass and present the contemporary city as a consumerist dreamland.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> 'Gaze sliding' is the term used by Nico Orengo to describe the oil and acrylic paint Estes uses to achieve the reflective quality in his works. See Sandro Parmiggiani and Guillermo Solana, *Richard Estes* [exh. cat. Reggio Emilia, Palazzo Magnani; Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza], Milan, Skira, 2007, 175.

<sup>8</sup> According to Karl Marx's fetishisation theory, objects take on an active and independent value while people are objectified and turned into consumer items in Pop Art still life.

## 9

See Marcia Castillo, 'La construcción de Venus: fragmentación, montaje y despersonalización del cuerpo femenino en la estética vanguardista', in *Representación, construcción, e interpretación de la imagen visual de las mujeres*, Madrid, Achiviana, 2003, 439–56; and Sabina Daniela Stent, 'Women Surrealists: Sexuality, Fetish, Femininity and Female Surrealism' [PhD diss.], Birmingham, University of Birmingham, 2011.

## 10

Rémy G. Saisselin, 'Still-Life Paintings in a Consumer Society', in *Leonardo* 9:3 (summer 1976), 197–203.

## 11

Michael Lobel, *Tom Wesselmann*, New York, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2016.

## 12

To learn more about the male gaze, see Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 1989.

## 13

Fetish objects are desirable products in that they create an unreal sensation of wellbeing when acquired. Advertising is responsible for this idealised view of objects, to the point of attributing them erotic and sexual qualities in advertisements to make them more appealing. Similarly, the people objectified by advertising also become fetish objects as they display similar qualities.

Mannequins were conspicuously present in avant-garde art, particularly in the works of the Surrealist artists, who used them to depict anonymous, alienated citizens. In Surrealist art, the figure of the mannequin reduces humans to mere lifeless articulable objects, and their presence alludes to the spectator's status as voyeur.<sup>9</sup> As automatons they bring to mind the still life depicted in Pop Art, since the desirable objects and bodies that usually appear in works of this kind similarly encourage consumption as an idealised and ephemeral way of life.<sup>10</sup> Mannequins belong to the culture of materialism, which the painter raises to the artistic sphere. But in the Pop Art universe, sexual symbolism continued to be explored and bodies reduced to sordidly eroticised forms as a biting satire of consumer society.<sup>11</sup> The human figures in Estes's picture do not fit this description, even when they recall these concepts. In general, too, mannequins are associated with women, giving rise to the issue of the male gaze as a form of domination of the female body.<sup>12</sup> Although it can only be conjectured that the figures in the shop windows are female, it seems safe to conclude that here both the people and the mannequins are symbols of the estranged city, indistinct from one another.<sup>13</sup>

Alienation is linked to the representation of society as a whole. In this painting, Estes captures the anonymous social mass in the same way as many American social realist artists, including photographer Walker Evans and painters John Sloan, Alice Neel and Ben Shahn. These artists' works were a source of inspiration for the painter when he set out to depict New York and its everyday atmosphere. The city and all its elements speak for the citizens, as it is they who are responsible for representing society. In their creations all these artists express the medley of cultures and races that has characterised New York City since its origins.



fig. 3

**Lee Friedlander*****New York City, 1963*****Gelatin silver print, 13.3 × 20.3 cm****The Museum of Modern Art, New York,****322.2000**

The same is true of the photographs taken by another artist. Lee Friedlander's *New York City* [fig. 3] shares a number of elements with *Telephone Booths* such as the telephone, the reflection and the silhouette of an unrecognisable person, in this case Black. As with the Macy's sign, the individual is eclipsed by the projected image, which takes on the role of referent of American society. Like Estes, Friedlander uses reflections to usher in new evocative images, in this instance a television studio where two anonymous people are engaged in dialogue beside an image of Dwight Eisenhower captioned 'United States', and a second image of a person who might be a European political representative (as indicated by the caption 'Europe') and bears a certain resemblance to Walter Hallstein. Unlike Estes, Friedlander uses photography as an artistic technique to destabilise the geometric order of his compositions and establish new associations. Both men depict the city with a great many visual devices that serve to convey a message about American society.<sup>14</sup>

14

After WWII a desire to exhibit the average citizen's domestic life emerged in America, which cultural institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art documented as patriotic propaganda. See Beatriz Colomina, *Domesticity at War*, Cambridge-London, The MIT Press, 2007.

fig. 4  
**Richard Estes**  
*Self-Portrait near the Oculus at World Trade Center, 2017*  
 Oil on canvas, 96.5 × 139.7 cm  
 Borja Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection



In line with the use of reflections as sources of information, it is fitting to mention another much later work by Estes in which the subject is mirrored in a shop window opposite where the viewer is positioned. *Self-Portrait near the Oculus at World Trade Center* [fig. 4] is a throw-back self-portrait in which the artist's face is concealed by his camera. His identity can be made out thanks to the reflection of the camera, which signals him as the maker of the image that has been transformed into a painting. The camera and the artist's eye merge to become a single instrument of artistic creation. Once again, it is the reflection that is responsible for giving messages about the citizen.

In *Self-Portrait near the Oculus at World Trade Center* the reflection is the main subject of the composition and, as in *Telephone Booths*, the inhabitants of the building remain hidden behind a glass wall. From this point of view, the phone cabin could be likened to a bubble, a common element in still-life painting<sup>15</sup> that symbolises fragility and the passage of time. The booths are similarly 'bubbles' that protect people from the gaze of others, though they offer only a temporary shelter whose protection can easily be shattered by opening the door. The possibility of breaking the security provided by the cubicles leads us to wonder who could be watching or listening and, conversely, who could be hiding inside the booths, questions that will be discussed in due course. The bubble link alludes to the concepts of fleetingness and perishability, which are characteristic traits of the consumer society.

15

See Joseph Cornell's *Blue Soap Bubble*, 1949–50, mixed media, 24.5 × 30.5 × 9.6 cm, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 492 (1978.11).

[+info]



In *Telephone Booths* the phone is as important as the booth. The word 'telephone' comes from the combination of the Greek roots 'têle' (far) and 'phōnē' (voice), indicating that it is an artefact which makes possible communication between two people separated by distance. Although the principal object in the work is an instrument of communication, there is no evidence here of a relationship between the people in the painting, let alone any sign they are engaged in conversation with someone on the other end of the phone. They stand in the cabins anonymously, with no indication of dialogue between them. Nor can we glimpse the telephone itself: the only image of the device is hinted at in the booth at far right and even then it is not clearly visible. In this way communication, in a work where the word 'telephone' is part of the title, appears to be cut off.

In short, the urban still life interacts with the viewer, not through the people but through the objects that tell us about the society in which they exist. Estes has arranged the elements in *Telephone Booths* on a large scale, as if he wanted to pull us inside the picture plane, yet at the same time he has obscured our view, discarding the idea of a passive spectator. Signs, motor vehicles in motion and other reflected objects make up a cityscape that speaks of New York society and establishes a distance from the individual subject. Each of these details warns of the perishability of consumer goods, the lack of communication between people and the characteristic transience of the metropolis, attesting to the frenzied rhythm of city life.

## Dualism

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The presence of a series of clashing concepts in the painting causes confusion and disorientation in the viewer. Dualisms such as objects which appear to be both inside and outside the booths at the same time, figures that can be human or manmade, the perceptible lack of communication in spaces designed to facilitate dialogue, and the signs mentioned earlier all imbue the work with a high degree of complexity. The fact that Estes introduces bewilderment and mystery in

fig. 5  
Detail of the sign on the far left cabin  
of *Telephone Booths*



his cosmopolitan cityscapes makes it necessary to carefully examine every detail, even if one of the intentions of Photorealism is to capture reality better than the human eye.

In terms of the composition of the picture, the coexistence of the grid pattern with the curved lines in the reflections is one of the dualities that affect the way the work is viewed. The straight lines show a city landscape structured chiefly by the rectangular booths and the black railings that run across the image behind them, parallel and perpendicular to the physical margins of the picture. This pattern is broken by the undulating lines of the reflections that mar the naturalist image, as they draw attention to the failure of the artifice and add to the confusion of the work.

Another dichotomy is that between object and reflection. A bewildering detail in this respect is the fact that the white inside the letter 'O' of the 'TELEPHONE' sign on the booth at far left is purely a reflection [fig. 5], whereas the plaque on which the letters appear does not display any gleams, even though the rest of the plaques seem to be made of metallic material.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, although reflections are powerfully present in the picture, this one seems to have lost its reflective ability; it is completely at odds with the play of representations and reflections.

The contrast between reflection and objective representation in Estes's oeuvre has been the subject of much discussion among scholars. Conservator Jessica May has made a notable contribution on the subject of the purity of the cities expressed in reflections<sup>17</sup> by pointing to the minimisation of the human presence to prevent it interfering with the idea of neatness, of the pared down city.

#### 16

On the plaque one can see that initially the artist wrote the letters of 'Telephone' from back to front and subsequently painted over them the final letters in the right direction. It is still possible to make out an 'O' before 'tele' and a 'T' after 'phone'.

#### 17

Jessica May and Patterson Sims, *Richard Estes' Realism: A Retrospective*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014, quoted in Parmiggiani and Solana, *Richard Estes*, n. 7, 13.



fig. 6  
**Richard Estes**  
*Diner*, 1971  
 Oil on canvas, 101.7 × 126.8 cm  
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture  
 Garden, Smithsonian Institution,  
 Washington D.C.

What is shown here, however, is a series of cubicles whose lower metallic surfaces have lost their gleam, whereas the upper sections continue to shine. The process whereby brightness is dulled signals deterioration, which is also present in the booth at far right whose door is ajar, possibly because it is broken. The half-open door likewise introduces another dichotomy between open and closed, inside and outside. It is worth comparing these dualisms with those that appear in a later work by the painter entitled *Diner* [fig. 6], which also features phone booths with noticeable scratches on their doors and rubbish of some kind at the right-hand corner of the diner. This is another example of antagonism, one that documents the presence of humans, a characteristic of the image of the bustling city understood as a place of transition and change.

Dualism is found yet again in the figures in *Telephone Booths* and in the difficulty of distinguishing between people and mannequins. This is due to the fact that, as mentioned earlier, they both serve the same purpose: to evoke a timeless world as mere objects. People represent the human, real and 'living' realm, whereas mannequins embody the other side of the coin – the artificial, fiction and the inert. By making

fig. 7

Frames from the short film  
*The Mechanical Monsters*,  
directed by Dave Fleischer,  
1941



them indistinguishable, Estes blurs the boundaries between opposites. The impossibility of telling them apart may be associated with the tension experienced during the Cold War in the United States, especially as a result of the 'witch hunt' led by senator McCarthy between 1950 and 1954 to find Communist sympathisers across the country. Fear of Soviet espionage, the infiltration of Communism, double identity and the unknown marked American society, and this was reflected in mass culture for decades. It was not until the 1960s that many socio-political issues of the 1940s and 1950s were digested and materialised by artists.<sup>18</sup> Estes explored the themes of lack of identity and individuality in many of his works, and *Telephone Booths* is no exception.

18

See Diane Waldman, *Roy Lichtenstein* [exh. cat. New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art; Montreal, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal], New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1993.

19

Other Pop artists from Andy Warhol to Roy Lichtenstein have incorporated the figure of Superman into their works as an iconic feature.

20

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aleAQyWzAbI&t=308s>.

Estes's oeuvre is fully in keeping with the popular culture of the period. The mysterious people inside the booths appear to be clad in raincoats, garments that conjure up the image of secret agents, popular characters in post-war comic strips and films. The cabin itself is also an object of popular culture associated with secrecy, the possibility of concealment in full daylight, a refuge inside the crowded public space of the city. The image of Clark Kent changing into Superman<sup>19</sup> inside a phone booth [fig. 7], a comic-strip icon that was taken up by various Pop artists, exemplifies this idea. Similarly, the booth is the place where the distinction between public and private, between the known and the hidden, becomes blurred.<sup>20</sup>



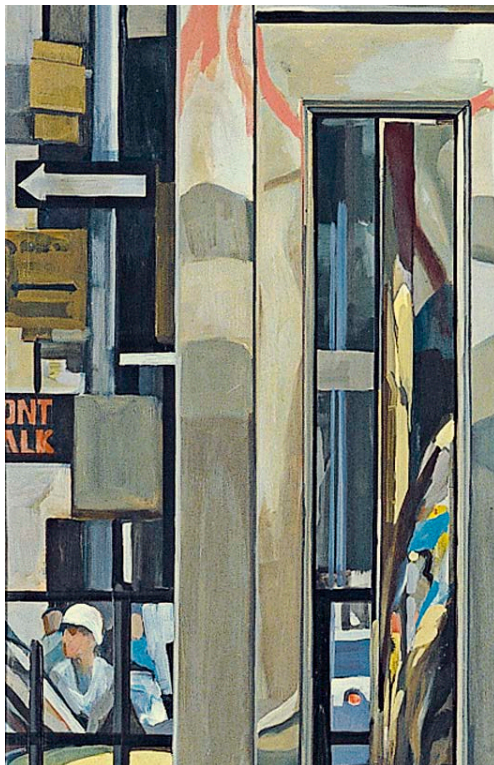


fig. 8  
Detail of traffic signs  
in *Telephone Booths*

Language, too, can underscore duality. Notable among the group of lettered signs in the picture is the marquee of Macy's, the famous American luxury department stores, on the right. Through the glass of the booths at the other end it is possible to make out the sign of the variety store F. Woolworth. Both establishments are identifiable to American viewers but they catered to people at opposite ends of the economic spectrum. This contrast highlights the heterogeneousness of the city.

Like language, symbols are a system for communicating. In *Telephone Booths*, an arrow on a signpost indicating the direction of the traffic can be made out on the left of the canvas and, beneath it, following the vertical line of the composition, a red traffic light instructs pedestrians to stop: 'Don't Walk' [fig. 8]. These two signs, one an icon, the other written words, represent two different languages, one pictographic and the other alphabetic. They furthermore contain opposite messages: move on and keep still. The traffic light in particular is a world in itself, as the traffic seems chaotic and fast moving, typical of big cities, and like the rest of the diffuse dualisms in the work warns of constant change and heightens the unsettling effect of this urban still life.

### Gaze and scopic drive

The phone booth is a typical prop in detective fiction, in which the main characters, spies and undercover agents, are part of mass culture. Stories of this genre were very popular in the throes of the Cold War, a period in which social fears of conspiracy were rife. But above all there was wariness about 'others' infiltrating 'us'. One could venture to say that these feelings are aroused by the incognito figures in raincoats that appear to be on the verge of making a phone call in the painting. Here the unknown encourages us to look closer to discover the enigmatic nature of the characters.

In 2014 Estes commented in an interview conducted by David Ebony: 'My basic thought is that it could be the ugliest thing in the world, but somehow you can make an interesting painting of it'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the artist succeeds in drawing attention to an everyday scene and turning it into something attractive to the spectator. The appeal of Estes's works lies chiefly in the play of reflections, but in *Telephone Booths* viewers additionally feel the desire to gaze at and listen to the people hiding behind the cabin doors, to encroach on their privacy and discover their secrets. Probably what is happening inside the cubicles is a trivial phone call, but it is the lack of certainty that makes the beholder yearn to find out what is going on.

It is inevitable to link this interest to what psychoanalysis calls the scopic drive, an impulse that transforms the need to see into a desire to gaze and be recognised in the gaze, which is related to the need for knowledge. It springs from the tension caused by unfamiliarity with an image and can be satisfied by gazing. Though not fully applicable to Estes's work, in the sense that the need to 'be recognised in the gaze' is not a feature of the painting, doubt as to what is going on inside the booths triggers this drive to know.

The uncertainty over whether the characters are making an innocent phone call or possibly doing something else links up with the abovementioned image of Superman, a good example of a popular icon who uses phone booths for a purpose other than their usual one: to conceal his other identity. In this case the scopic drive kindles the desire to find out not only what the people in the painting are doing but also who they are and why Estes has endowed them with such a mysterious appearance. Owing to the insecurity stemming from conspiracy fears and concern about the concept of 'them' in the society of the time, the gaze becomes an instrument of discernment that is essential for getting about the city. In such a changing place as New York, sharp wits become politicised cognitive tools, that is, mechanisms for discovering everything that can escape perception. Estes creates an everyday setting where he challenges viewers to put their visual abilities to the test. The intention is to prime their perception, train their gaze, which is why the painting is pleasing on account of all it shows, but also challenging insofar as it requires spectators to put into practice their visual abilities.<sup>22</sup>

21

'The Eye Man: An Interview with Richard Estes by David Ebony', 2014, available at: [The Eye Man: An Interview with Richard Estes by David Ebony](#) - Yale University Press.

22

On the subject of American *trompe l'oeil* paintings with educational aims, see Bellion, *Citizen Spectator*, see n. 3.

fig. 9  
**Richard Estes**  
*CD*, 2014  
 Oil on panel, 34.3 × 48.9 cm  
 Marlborough Gallery, New York

fig. 10  
**Richard Estes**  
*The Eye Man*, 2014  
 Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 152.4 cm  
 Collection of Elliott and Marlys  
 Badzin, Minneapolis, courtesy  
 of Marlborough Gallery, New York

Scopic drive, as mentioned earlier, goes beyond the desire to see; it also encompasses the need to be seen. However, in *Telephone Booths* none of the characters look out of the picture plane toward the viewer. This is because all the figures are faceless. Indeed, neither the mannequins nor the people are given faces, either because they are not rendered in detail or because they are standing with their back to the viewer. Painting the face amounts to painting the act of looking. According to psychoanalytical theories, it is the gaze that activates the relationship between object and subject and generates identity. That is why the mannequins are indistinguishable from the people, who become objectified on being deprived of a face.<sup>23</sup> With no face to gaze at and gaze back at the viewer, both the figures in the picture and the viewers become denaturalised. Negation of the gaze is an allusion to death, as the drive to look is not satisfied and the subject is denied.

Not only does the absence of that gaze thwart the scopic drive but the materials of which the booths are made, glass and metal, are in themselves elements that contribute to rejection, as they do not allow viewers to explore inside the booths. Although the still life draws spectators into the scene, it also distances them.<sup>24</sup> Faced with the impossibility of distinguishing the people in the painting or being recognised in their gaze, viewers become dehumanised and alien in the familiar city setting.

In a later painting by the artist entitled *CD* [fig. 9], the observer's gaze is again constrained, and therefore so is their perception, through the scaffolding that fragments the image in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish between reflection, real object and the interior of the building. The artist seems to want to achieve an effect opposite to the traditional painting device of *repoussoir* whereby a human figure with its back to the viewer on one side of the foreground directs the spectator's gaze towards the centre of the image, drawing the viewer into the scene. In this case the opposite occurs: the observer does not feel 'included' in the scene as the criss-crossing scaffolding obscures their vision.

## 23

The gaze in turn creates an effect of a panopticon as a means of continuous monitoring that eventually subdues the individual.

## 24

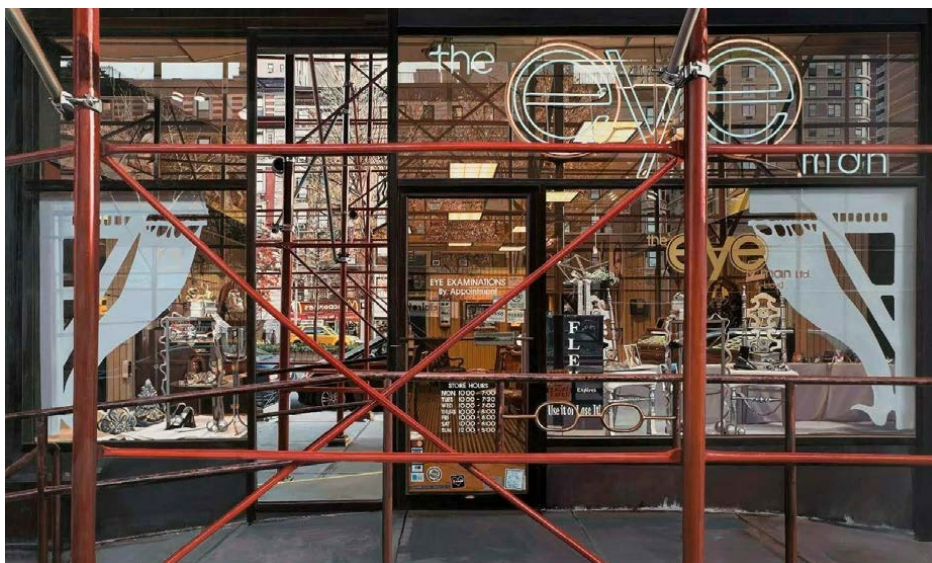
The sight of the reflection in the booths of the signs that are supposedly located behind the spectator triggers the feeling of being inside the picture plane. See Guillermo Solana, *Richard Estes: obra reciente* [exh. cat.], Barcelona, Marlborough, 2017, 173.

fig. 9

**Richard Estes**  
**CD, 2014**  
Oil on panel, 34.3 × 48.9 cm  
Marlborough Gallery, New York

fig. 10

**Richard Estes**  
**The Eye Man, 2014**  
Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 152.4 cm  
Collection of Elliott and Marlys  
Badzin, Minneapolis, courtesy  
of Marlborough Gallery, New York



25

This work is inspired by French rococo artist Jean-Antoine Watteau's painting *The Shop Sign of Gersaint* (1720–21), oil on canvas, 163 × 308 cm, Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin.

Continuing along these lines, in *The Eye Man* [fig. 10],<sup>25</sup> dating from the same period as the previous work, the scaffolding reappears, this time in red, again obstructing our gaze. In this case the bars of the scaffolding partially cover the window of an optometrist's office and eyeglass store whose sign reads 'the eye man'. The artist thus completes the game of rendering the gaze useless and obstructs perception by fragmenting the image of an establishment specialising precisely in the sense of sight.



Similarly, in *Telephone Booths* the glass wall, the position of the people inside the cubicles with their backs to the viewer and the chaotic combination of reflections and transparencies serve a purpose contrary to that of the concept of *repoussoir*: to exclude the gaze. Besides failing to satisfy the scopic drive owing to the absence of visual contact between the painted figures and the viewers and the many dualisms in place, the scene triggers bewilderment. All this adds to the unsettling sensation that is roused by the raincoat-clad figures and causes the viewer to experience contradictory feelings of attraction and repulsion towards the telephone cabins.

On viewing this work the spectator has the sensation of time stood still and of an instant captured from a distance. Although city life has ground to a halt, the image is nonetheless confusing, as it is difficult to define what or who we are looking at, impeded by all the dualisms and elements discussed above. The result is highly paradoxical, as this bewilderment is what makes the work fascinating and, despite all the obstacles, spurs us to keep on gazing at it. In this painting focused on telephones, communication is performed by objects and reflections and there is no relationship whatsoever between characters and viewers. *Telephone Booths* urges us to reflect on the current need to educate an active audience with a critical eye in a present characterised by a huge increase in visual content, advertising and instant images. ●