

Medium Loci

The Place as a Fine art medium

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Thought and Practise of Current Art

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Abstract:

This paper introduces the white cube as a phenomenon of contemporary exhibiting practice, investigates what influence locality (geographical area, gallery layout and conception, socio-economical bonds) has on the perception and coherence of work of art. At the same time, we probe into how work of art can intervene and influence such areas in whose it is presented. We will compare approaches of theorists of art and we will demonstrate selected aspects on the example of photography art project „Medium Loci“ (2014 – present).

Keywords:

contemporary art space, gallery, influence, Medium Loci, locality, museum, region, white cube

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Ad topics of Space and Place in Contemporary Art / Projects, action and documentation.

Introduction

This paper analyses the issue of “if and how” the gallery space affects the perception of exhibited artworks and also if the artworks somehow change our perception of the gallery space. A large part of the paper consists of re-evaluating a phenomenon of white cube gallery. It focuses primarily on the issue of clear gallery space, excluded from the outer world, providing presented artworks neutral surrounding for perception and interpretation. The text also suggests that this approach is no longer valid, although the effort to maintain a clean, white gallery space lasts. New tendencies have appeared, trying to intentionally preserve and include context of the gallery surrounding, providing the artworks new perspectives. Finally, all these findings are applied on the example of photography art project „Medium Loci“. It is an unusual photography project, that reacts on the established form of travelling exhibitions by disrupting the usual form, when the same artworks move from one gallery to another. In this project the gallery space is the main guide when preparing site-specific exhibition, because all the artworks change every time they are exposed to fit the specific gallery space. Also the artworks change the space of the gallery with intervening into it by building artificial obstacles or by using another means to change the usual appearance of the space.

Reintroducing the concept of white cube

Gallery as an exhibition space is unquestionably an essential part of presenting individual artworks and also influences our perception of them. Not so long ago the statement about the “end of the museum” appeared¹. This situation has evolved from 1976 when the “white cube museum” first appeared as derisive and critical term. Meaning that such museum serves only for exclusive art selected by certain aesthetic aspects and it's the same in all those museums. But the appearance of the gallery space evolved in 70's still hasn't changed and the white cube appearance is broadly accepted till nowadays. Which means that history of modern art can be linked to the changes in the white cube gallery space and the

1 Written by GOODMAN, Nelson . The End of the Museum?, published eg. 1985 in *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19

way we perceive it. Today, we got even so far, that the first thing that attracts our attention isn't the artwork but the gallery space itself. That brings out an interesting question – isn't it possible that the image of the white cube gallery may be regarded as the archetypal image of twentieth century art rather than any particular work of art?

With white cube concept the ideal gallery space creates such environment for the artworks, that it is deprived of all signs that could call into question the fact that it is the "art" in any way. Art should be separated from anything that would limit the possibility to evaluate it as the artwork itself. White cube gallery originates from the same strict rules as medieval churches. By that the gallery space acquires the character of areas, where through constant repetition of a closed system of values, certain conventions are formed. With features of the sanctity of the church, the rigidity of the courtroom and mysticism of the experimental laboratory combined with stylish design it generates a unique aesthetic chamber. As pointed out by Brian O'Doherty², the ongoing effort of tearing the artefact out of "now" into "timelessness" is unprecedented. Space with no windows, air temperature and lighting with no relation to outside world³. All noises are diminished, so are the manifest of human body – it is forbidden to talk, to eat or to lie down in a museum.⁴ Also photographic documentation of show is standardized. Art space must always be empty, clean and again timeless. This "power" of the gallery space has caused that the artworks not included in it, may not be recognized as art. And conversely - the ordinary things placed into the white cube by it's aesthetical power becomes art. Outer world can not get inside, so the windows are usually blinded. The walls are painted white, the ceiling becomes the source of light and there doesn't have to be a single piece of furniture. This creates a context in which even the custodian's chair can become almost sacred object, just as the fire extinguisher acts more like an intended aesthetic art-piece. White, clean, artificial, without shadows – that's the white cube gallery space. Artworks are hung here and disposed, with unaffected surface untouched by time, they stay

2 O'DOHERTY, Brian. *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space*. Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1976

3 In this context, let us remind actions of Olafur Eliasson in TATE Modern, London, where he created whole new weather atmosphere, including rain and sun.

4 This have started to change just recently in western countries – major museums are turning into de facto point of day-trips and excursion for schoolchildren and basically anything is allowed. In the Czech republic, stewards' policies remain strict.

there in eternity and carry the timeless meanings of its times. In such space any visitor acts as something redundant, as unwanted intrusion. Also photography documentation of the installation is a metaphor of the gallery space - you're there, without having to be there. That is the ideal of white cube gallery.

As it was already said before, gallery space is crucial for perceiving and interpreting exhibited artworks. Also Robert Storr summarized this idea in his text *Show and tell*, published in *What makes a great exhibition book*:

*“Space is the medium in which ideas are visually phrased. Installation is both presentation and commentary, documentation and interpretation. Galleries are paragraphs, the walls and formal subdivisions of the floors are sentences, clusters of works are clauses, and individual works, in varying degree, operate as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and often as more than one of these functions according to their context.”*⁵

That means that the way of presenting the artworks, the installation is never random. And it doesn't matter if it was intentional either by artist or curator or not, it always affects how people will pursue the exhibition's message. And maybe they can create new meanings and connections between the artworks, that weren't originally there. The only question remains, if it is desired or not or, in another words, if it is in today's post-modern way of thinking possible to present an exhibition that would not have more than one meaning and way of reading.

Gallery specifics in the Czech republic

The phenomenon of the white cube as a gallery space in the Czech Republic is more typical for large galleries, which have their own space built directly for the purpose of exhibiting. Because of the situation with the cultural financing, recently there was an emergence of large number of small galleries, exhibiting art also in less typical, alternative gallery spaces. Although it seems that most of the galleries

5 STORR, Robert; *Show and tell* in MARINCOLA, Paula; *What makes a great exhibition?.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 23

are trying to respect the main principles of the white cube – white walls, no daylight, unified lightning etc., it is not possible to acquire the perfect white cube gallery space. Because many of the most important and influential contemporary art galleries are placed in the building with peculiar specific. Such as large distinctive ceiling (vault ceiling in old Gothic houses), remnants of factory production (manufacturing machines etc.) or the entire building and it's original purpose (church, ceremonial hall, farmhouse, factory etc.)



Picture no. 1: DOX, Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague, source: <http://www.designmagazin.cz/>

There are not many galleries in Czech republic we can denote as pure white cube gallery space. There are two well-known galleries placed in white cube building space. Both of them meet the requirements of white cube for isolating the artworks from connotations of outer world by white walls, large open spaces leaving artworks enough space, no furniture or ceiling lightning. First one is DOX, Center for Contemporary Art in Prague (pic. no. 1), private art initiative financially independent from state institutions, that has build a new building for exhibiting contemporary art in Prague's Holešovice district. It's programme is founded on international co-operation, but focusing primarily on the Czech art scene.

The other one is The Brno House of Arts (pic. no. 2), located in city of Brno, originally Secession era building that was rebuilt in the Functionalist style

according to architectural plans by Bohuslav Fuchs in 1946-47. Now it has almost white cube gallery propositions, with only exception – the daylight coming inside through windows supplemented with artificial lightning.



Picture no. 2: The Brno House of Arts, source: <http://artalk.cz/>

Locality as an influence

Besides those „white cube“ galleries in Czech republic, as mentioned above, in last few decades a large number of small galleries or galleries outside the capital city of Prague (regional ones) have emerged. It is possible to trace the tendency, that most of them are trying to intentionally preserve the original appearance of the building in which the gallery is located. For example, recently, several galleries has formed in the former factory buildings, such as Paper Factory in Pilsen (Papírna Plzeň, pic. no. 3), Armaturka in Ústí nad Labem or Plato Ostrava. The main difference between those galleries and the “white cube“ galleries is that usually the artists exhibiting in such gallery are forced to deal directly with the specific exhibition space, so that the gallery directly affects the works that are therein exposed. So, with a little exaggeration, we can say the same about the geographic location of the gallery. Usually those factories are standing in the disputed part of the city, surrounded by a problematic environment and without interest of local residents nor city councillors.



Picture no. 3: *Papírna Plzeň*, source: <https://www.facebook.com/PapirnaPlzen>

This means that the gallery in such case acts as a “revitalizing element” for such environment. It raises funds for the reconstruction of the area, transforms it into residents-friendly place and makes it worth preserving. Then it is difficult to apprehend such place without its context and to perceive the exhibited works just by themselves. And precisely because these galleries usually stand on the city surroundings, it also brings up another issues and questions, that may influence the artworks. For example, the issue of excluded communities living on the outskirts, air pollution caused by factory production affecting the city, poverty, segregation and similar moral issues.

Locality as a medium

Our perception of both visual imagery and gallery space is very much accustomed and if we will standardized, as contemporary onlooker is almost bombarded with new shows and more content day after day. Not to mentioned general mass-media, such as internet or TV, but even a platform of quality curated galleries, museums and venues in over mediocre sized cities offer plethora of exhibitions to visit every week. Rules inevitably had to be establish for both artists and gallerists to smoothly handle the process of presenting (motion picture based) pieces of art, creating certain expectations how to read the world, certain kind of prejudice. To re-evaluate and reinvestigate those standardized gallery approaches, project *Medium Loci* has been launched in 2014 by students of Department of Photography at Faculty of Art and Design in Ústí nad Labem. The title “Medium

Loci” is a combination of words medium and genius loci. It is used this way to point out the fact that place or region itself, through it’s genuine qualities can represent visual medium.

The idea of importance of being local came into focus of master photography students and their professor. It has been decided to deny the general concept of transporting the same artworks around several art venues and showing them over and over. Instead, we prepare the entire show specifically for the selected location. We visit it in advance and stay at the place for 3 – 4 days so we can react in our personal way. As Baudelaire⁶ explains ”For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite”. Exhibition usually consists of photographs, video installations and figurative reactions to the gallery space. In each city, artists dig in local history, current political and cultural situation. This way, they often provide local people with new point of view, both socially and aesthetically. Furthermore, we transform the gallery itself dramatically, be it by building new walls, restricting access to some of the rooms or even by filling the space with artificial fog during the opening⁷. All this to match the overall concept of exhibition (which then well reflects the city itself). There always is an action of kind included during the opening.

Reconverting the gallery is an important aspect. Following our example of filling the gallery with artificial fog (pic. no. 4), onlookers (even if they visited the gallery before and knew it) were forced to fully rediscover the space (at some moments even with their hands) and closely approach exhibited art pieces. Thus, the usual opening conventions are compromised and more power is given to the artists, that can use the limited orientation as their asset. Perhaps even general public, that normally wouldn’t visit art exhibition can be persuaded by this aspect of experience. At the same time, the gallery space is reinvented for the gallery managers themselves – opening possibilities for further distortions in future.

6 BAUDELAIRE, Charles; *Painter of modern life and other essays*. 2nd ed. London: Phaidon, 2005, p. 9.

7 Galerie NF, Ústí nad Labem 2014



Picture no. 4: *Medium Loci* project, author: Alžběta Kočvarová

Part of the programme are always guided visits with both artists and curator, where they further explain the concept and in fact teach local people about their own city, providing them with new perspectives. Furthermore, extra courses for local art high schools are held, showing the students new approaches in fine art photography, and encouraging them to think more about the place they live, which is very much needed.

*"People are generally afraid of things that are unfamiliar to them, and when it comes to art they are most afraid of the embarrassment of appearing not to get it. This is normal, but it should not cause the exhibition-maker to underestimate their intelligence or their ability to learn."*⁸

Interesting point of the project is documentation of it. This is especially important, as the exhibition always changes completely (after already visiting 5 different cities, only core pieces are kept and transported to another). Sometimes, it would be impossible to explain the project concept to gallery owner without it. Furthermore, in the end, documentation sometimes becomes part of the main exposition, too. This was most exemplarily done at SINNLICHKEIT festival in former prison in Magdeburg, 2015. Artists were shedding some light on forgotten stories of the establishment. After collecting numerous pieces of evidence left around the building, they were able to imprint those into analogue film materials⁹, granting it ethereal aesthetics, new sensibility. Combined with artefacts from previously

8 STORR, Robert; *Show and tell* in MARINCOLA, Paula; *What makes a great exhibition?*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 24.

9 that was found in abandoned prison hospital

examined locations, exhibition was telling a story of human nature.

Important component of the project is its web blog¹⁰ which includes, besides press releases and photography documentation of the shows, also some previously unpublished images and interpretations of the gallery and the city. For instance, it is a strong tool for communicating with the high school audience, as most of the student is also familiar with Tumblr platform, which we use and thus can easily interact and comment within the blog.

Summary

This paper introduced the format of white cube as a phenomenon of contemporary exhibiting practice, and further explained what influence locality (geographical area, gallery layout and conception, socio-economical bonds) has on the perception and coherence of works of art. Further, we probed into how work of art can intervene and influence such areas in whose it is presented. We have compared approaches of selected theorists of art and we have demonstrated selected aspects on the example of photography art project „Medium Loci“ (2014 – present).

10 <http://mediumloci.tumblr.com/>

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